
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
天鏡のアルデラミン
X
Alderamin on the Sky
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
Illustration 竜徹
キャラクター原案 さんば挿

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ねじ巻き精霊戦記 天鏡のアルデラミン
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TAIKI KAWAKAMI PRESENTS



Chapter 1: Battle on the Tableland

For the pursuers and the ones being pursued, the former would usually have the upperhand psychologically, and this was no exception.

「Hah! Hah! Hah...!」「Huff! Huff...」「Wheeze… Wheeze...」

A large number of Imperial soldiers were marching back home in a squashed file formation along the meandering mountain paths. They moved fast and didn't stop often for breaks. The series of up and down slopes weighed painfully on their waist and legs. The fatigue added to the tension of the return trip that was double that of their journey here, casting a gloom on their faces.

It was impossible for the soldiers to feel at ease with the pursuers chasing them. In the mountain range that was already too harsh for humans, the Kioka Army and Alderamin army was right on their tails.

「......」

The commander Matthew Tetzirich moved in the centre of the formation as he watched his men with a serious face.

His army was slowing down as time passed, and their reaction speed became more sluggish. No matter how many times he reminded the men, their formation would crumble very often. After accepting all these facts, he immediately stopped in his tracks.

「... Halt the march. We will have a long break here and let the men rest.」

「But Major—」

This was a break that many soldiers were looking forward to. However, his adjutant was conscious of the enemy right behind them, and his eyes were saying that this was no time to rest. Matthew felt the same way, but he repeated his orders firmly.

「No, we will take a long break. We still have a long way to go, not resting now will have an adverse effect on us in the future.」

Issuing meaningless orders that would wear their troops out was a common mistake made by subpar commanders— the pudgy youth convinced himself with that, and led by example by sitting down with his legs crossed. The soldiers around him also sat down timidly.

His adjutant was still standing hesitantly, so Matthew pulled him over by the arm.

「Here, sit down and grab a bite. Don't worry, the enemy hasn't caught up with us.」

Before the adjutant could say anything, the youth shoved a piece of dried almond into his mouth. With a glance at his adjutant who had no choice but to chew, Matthew focused his attention to the rear.

「... It’s fine right, Torway?」

He only mumbled the name of his comrade softly, to avoid anyone hearing him. His comrade who was acting as the rearguard. Torway had grown incredibly reliable, but his changed mentality made Matthew worried

Instead of the safety of himself and his men, he was more worried about the jade-eyed youth.

＊

On the other hand, a few km to the east of the mountain path. In contrast to the gloomy Imperial forces, the Kioka army in pursuit was in high spirits.

「Forward, forward, forward! The enemy is fleeing with their tails between their legs! This is our chance to hit them in their defenceless backs!」

The officers urged their men forth, adhering to the principle that speed was of the essence in military maneuvers. They formed a stark contrast with Matthew who chose to rest despite the dire situation. Sprinting would sap their strength drastically, but considering the situation, this strategy was crude but not entirely wrong.

「Charge forth even if your legs go numb! If we give the enemy time, they will erect a base! If you don’t put in the work now, you will be the one to suffer later!」

The commanders kept pushing them. The soldiers running with ragged breath understood that logic and didn't complain. The routed enemy was excellent prey, that was a basic stratagem. However—

「Run, run! Catch them before the enemy builds a stronghold and crush them! Don't even think about resting, charge even if your lungs shyyaaaaa?」

The hoarse voice urging the troops forth stopped suddenly. The commander with a bullet between his brows fell onto his back, and a hail of bullets rained down mercilessly on the soldiers watching this scene. They fell back in a panic, and their advance was stalled.

Attacking the defenceless backs of the enemy wasn't that easy. It was common sense in the military to leave an reliable unit to stop the pursuers and protect the retreating army that was at its weakest.

「— Seventeen hits. The enemy forward elements have retreated down the slope.」

The spotter observing the results through his telescope reported calmly— about 200m in front of the Kioka army, snipers in camouflage uniforms set up positions on the cliffs flanking the road.

「Continue defensive fire. Fire at will once the enemy is in range.」

The leader of these sharpshooters, Lieutenant Colonel Torway Remeon, ordered with a steadfast tone. From the number of stars on his rank epaulette, he shouldn't be fighting beside the grunts on the frontlines— but he ignored this convention and continued serving at

the frontline by his own will.

「I already know from the start about the difference in our numbers, but how much time can we buy if we continue to fight?」

One sniper asked with his finger still on the trigger. The jade-eyed youth didn’t look his way and answered immediately.

「Unless they break through the other routes, we can hold this place for at least a day. We will fall back when our ammunition falls beneath 30%— then we will delay the enemy and move westwards in stages, repeating the same actions until we link up safely with friendly forces.」

His tone didn’t permit any refusal. His subordinates made their resolve and focused on the enemy movements, while Torway looked in a different direction as if he sensed something.

「...........」

「...? What’s the matter, Commanding Officer—?」

An unexpected impact cut his question short. His body was slammed from the side by his superior officer, and he fell over from his kneeling shooting position. Right after that— bullets flew right above him.

「—Tch—」

Torway used the momentum that saved the life of his subordinate and assumed a prone shooting posture. He concentrated at the direction where the shot came from, and squeezed the trigger.

「—Phew!」

「Gyaa—!」

At almost the same time, a Kioka soldier in the grass 150m away died.

「Belsi...?」 「Medic!」

Seeing their comrade died in an unexpected circumstance made the soldiers around them waver. But some of the veterans ignored them and were in awe.

「—Are you kidding me? What's with that shot?」

A scout observing through his telescope said with a quiet trembling voice. The man holding a Wind Gun beside him smirked his lips bitterly.

「... I wished that was just my imagination too, but you saw that, right?」

「Yes… That tall gunner killed Belsi the moment he fell over.」

That was a surreal shot, just grasping how these events were related was a miracle. Dropping to the ground to evade the shot, taking aim and squeezing the trigger— he did all that in less than a second and reaped away the life of Private First Class Belsi. A godly technique in the realm of being ludicrous.

「... Could that be the 『Remeon of the Gun』?」

「That's a shot from over a hundred metre away. Just hitting on the first try is incredible.」

However, they couldn't continue feeling impressed. Their rage from having a comrade killed before their eyes overwhelmed the back chilling fear they felt, and they gripped their guns tightly.

「—Enough chat, we have to take out that guy. If he gets away, we will lose hundreds of comrades to him in the future!」

「Yes, I know!」

「—Enemy hiding in the shrubs down the slope to the southeast. Section seven, return fire.」

Not knowing how impactful his shot was to the enemy, Torway who was under retaliatory fire calmly instructed his men.

「They saw through our deployments? They are reacting faster than expected.」

「This means the enemy is outstanding— Sergeant Terran, you have 30 seconds to propose the best tactic to wipe out the enemy in that area.」

He pushed his subordinate to think. He already knew the best answer, but intentionally held back. With no regards to the harsh situation, the youth just treated this battle as a test run of his unit. He was determined to spur the growth of his subordinates.

Realizing the intention of his superior, Sergeant Terran fell silent for a moment.

「... I will take my section and detour along the north to the east hills. If everyone draws the enemy's attention, in twenty minutes—」

At this moment, the Sergeant realized something and stopped. He immediately checked the detour route he proposed with his telescope— from the way the grass was swaying unnaturally, he was certain his judgement was in error.

「—My apologies, the opponent expected this possibility and set up an ambush… Please give me 30 minutes. I will take two sections to take the east hill and give suppressing fire on the enemy.」

「Good. When you capture that hill, the enemy would probably have withdrawn.」

Torway gave a passing grade to his subordinate's judgement. Sergeant Terran felt a sense of pride well in his chest, then looked at his superior with unease.

「We won't be able to support the battle on this end, will that be fine?」

「Don't worry. I won't think of units that have to redeploy as an idling forces.」

Torway's immediate answer made the Sergeant hold his breath… The air about him was too tense, even the men who had served under him for a long time felt awe inspiring fear from him.

「
*Mum**
— interesting. Very interesting.」

The white-haired officer climbed up high onto the platform despite his adjutant's protest, and watched the battlefield with shining eyes.

「Miara, look, this is an unprecedented battlefield. Highly trained Wind Gunners are obstructing our advance, and we are trying to take them out with our snipers too. I can't get a good look at them, but they are definitely the protagonist of this battlefield.」

「Yes, I heard you, so lower your body! We might be out of range, but a stray bullet might still fly over!」

Miara stood before him as if she was protecting an obstinate child. Jean gently placed his hands on her shoulders and continued:

「I have to admit that right now, their usage of gunners is better than me. They are obviously used to operating in units smaller than sections. Given the range of the weapons, there is no need to gather all the troops in one spot for firepower. However, intensive training would be needed for the small units to decide on their own actions. 」

He complimented the enemy frankly without any hostility or bias. So the adjutant had to shoulder these negative aspects. She stiffened her face and commented.

「... I agree that those Wind Gunners are a pain in this place, but they aren't that much of a threat. They would be a pushover on an open terrain. If they hid in the grass or on cliffs, our Blast Cannon can destroy them along with their cover.」

「

Syah

*. But we will run into problems if we keep relying on the advantage of our Blast Cannons. I think the way we fight has to evolve too.

Oh right— What's your view on this battle, Professor?」

Jean kept his eyes on the battlefield as he asked the old sage who scaled the platform behind them. Anarai brushed off the sand on his knees and stood beside Jean with a grunt.

「If you want to break through swiftly, you will need to take care of the enemy shooter.」

「

Yah

*. I considered starting a smoke screen, but we are downwind. Their accuracy will fall after sunset, but that will make our advance difficult instead.」

「It will be dangerous to walk in the mountains at night. If I'm the Imperials, I will use this golden opportunity. By using the terrain and setting traps, it might be possible to destroy a large army.」

「It is as you say, considering the risks, we can't move at night, we have to break through in the day.」

Jean nodded. However— Miara knew the truth. When he was describing how arduous the task was, he didn't show any anxiety or unease. That relaxed tone was how Jean spoke when he had solved a difficult problem.

「And so, I will create a break through.」

*

「Hah! Hah! Hah——」

In the Imperial Army basecamp, soldiers focused on construction work bustled around. A man was running towards the west of the

basecamp with ragged breath. The rank epaulette on his shoulder didn’t match his appearance of a man just past his thirties— he was a Brigadier General.

「— Your Majesty Chamille! Y-You are safe!」

His voice turned shrill from nervousness and fear, making it clear that the person in the west of the basecamp outranked him in every conceivable way. Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik walked casually out of the wall of bodyguards and welcomed her vassal.

「At ease… Sorry for drawing the enemy here.」

Chamille pouted bitterly and cast her gaze behind.

「This basecamp has been moved deeper in than reported, so we linked up a few days later than expected.」

「Yes, my deep apologies...」

「I’m not admonishing you. I have performed disgracefully too, and want to grasp the situation. What happened here?」

Sazarf understood that the Empress was more interested in intel than an apology, and spoke after a brief pause.

「Major Matthew who pursued the devotees to the east suffered a retaliatory blow from the enemy, and is starting to withdraw. We are expecting pursuers, so we shifted the base eastwards to link up with

them sooner.」

After getting the answer she expected, Chamille pursed her lips.

「... Things still turned out this badly even with Torway there, huh. This means that we can’t leave this place before linking up with Matthew and the rest.」

「Yes… If we don’t abandon them.」

The young Brigadier General added coldly. Realizing what he was insinuating, the Empress glared at him.

「Don’t belittle me, Sazarf. Do I look like I intend to do that?」

「— I misspoke. Pardon my insolence, Your Majesty.」

Sazarf said with a relieved face and bowed deeply. Chamille continued glaring, then averted her gaze with a sigh.

「... Since you made the resolve to not abandon your subordinates even at the risk of death, I will forgive this time.」

Chamille said with a more mellowed tone. The top priority of the Imperial soldier was to ensure the safety of the Empress— but the Empress had not thought of that at all.

The people who thought of the girl as a tyrant didn't know. She could be cruel if need be, but she never felt that her life was worth protecting at the expense of others.

「Thank you for your magnanimity, Your Majesty. We have considered the plans to escort Your Majesty to safety, and it is possible to form a detachment unit for this, however—」

Sazarf stopped and looked at the enemy to the west with a stiff face.

「— We will need a large force to protect Your Majesty and break through the enemy forces… About half of the troops we have on hand.」

「If we divide our forces, it will be difficult to fend off the enemy pursuing Matthew's forces.」

The girl finished his sentence. Sazarf was no longer surprised by how fast she was in grasping the situation and nodded.

「I apologize for my incompetence, it is as you say.」

Chamille looked around her after hearing that answer, then spoke after thinking for a brief moment.

「Will it be difficult to destroy them with all our forces on hand, then come back to help Matthew's forces?」

「Right now, our entire forces are committed to building up a stronghold. If we send them out to fight, their work will stall. If we win a quick and decisive victory, they might be able to return to their work after that… But if the battle drags on, our base will be defenceless when the enemy comes from the east.」

「I see. We can't leave before Matthew's forces return, and the enemy will arrive when they do. So it's inevitable that we will have to fight on two fronts.」

「Unfortunately, that's true...」

Sazarf lowered his gaze, ashamed of his own incompetence. But the Empress felt it was a waste to waste any time feeling depressed, and continued with determined eyes.

「Since this is the situation we are in, we have to accept it. Have you considered our actions after we are attacked from both sides?」

There was a strict sense of righteousness in her golden eyes as she waited for Sazarf's reply. Urged by her gaze, the man straightened his back, looked to the future and answered.

「I did. With the terrain here—」

*

「...Phew...!」

The Imperial forces continued retreating at their best speed without exhausting the troops to the point of collapsing. At the rear of the formation, explosions of compressed air increased in frequency, but Torway's breathing remained steady.

「Section 7, support the right flank! The enemy is trying to break through from there!」

「Yes Sir...! But if we go, there will only be twenty odd people here—」

A rifle report drowned out the soldier's word of concern. As a new corpse appeared in his gun sights, the youth answered his subordinate with eyes that didn't have a shred of warmth in them.

「We can manage with this numbers— I won't miss a single shot henceforth.」

「Y-Yes Sir!」

His intimidating aura that gave no room for negotiation sent the soldier scampering off. The jade-eyed youth glanced at his back and thought quickly— He was the commander of the sniping unit, and his duties entailed more than just eliminating the enemy within his field of vision.

With Wind Rifles growing more common in both armies, their effective shooting range was evenly matched. His battalion of 600 men had to delay the Kioka army that numbered over 3,000 under

such conditions. Normally, this would only be possible with forts and strongholds, but Torway's outstanding troop deployment overturned this norm.

「... Phew...!」

Their tactic was to not show any traces. Blending into the forest with camouflage uniforms covered in grass and branches, they sniped the enemy from the dark.

When these 「invisible snipers」 displayed extraordinary killing efficiency through their highly trained shooting techniques, how would that affect the enemy psychology?

「— Fear—」

There was only one answer. They would see phantoms. Overestimate the numbers of the enemy they couldn't see, and tremble at their own delusion. Fearing that the enemy might be there— the things the dark-haired youth mentioned in the past had been nurtured into a monster by Torway Remeon.

「— Fear that darkness. Men or women, young or old, brave or timid. There are no differences between all living beings—!」

「— No, there's nothing to fear.」

However, there was a hero here who stood up to defy the monster.

「A battalion of 600 men at the most, that's the extent of your battle potential.」

The white-haired officer concluded and turned gallantly, declaring to his big bodied staff behind him with a fearless smile.

「The deployment of the enemy is what I have told you. Trust me, Harrah.」

「Leave it to me.」

Harrah responded to his instruction without any hesitation, bracing himself and raising his voice at his men standing by.

「Spread out in ranks! Gunners, take aim!」

The soldiers spread out along the entire mountain path as ordered. The first, second and third rank stood in staggered formation, giving everyone a clear shot before them. A tight formation that prioritized causing shock and awe— this tactic might seem outdated compared to the Empire, but they still prepared to attack with pride in their stances.

「Fire!」

Salvo, advance, reload, salvo, advance, reload— the trained shooting actions continued without any stoppages, and the sound of compressed air explosion kept sounding out. Unlike mediocre troopers who only served in the firing line because of the threats

from their commanders, they displayed the aesthetics in form through tireless training.

「Don't leave any gaps in the firing line! The rear will supply ammunition to meet the front's demand, if there is any gun malfunction, swap places with the rear quickly!」

When they advanced about 50m, Harrah raised a hand and yelled.

「Cease fire! Change target— shift 70 degrees to the left!」

The gunners immediately changed their targets, and the row of guns locked onto the invisible enemy hiding under the shade of the trees.

The snipers were about to change their position to match the advance of the enemy like before. However— a dense hail of bullets suddenly assaulted them from behind.

「What...?」「Hyaa...!」

Wood shreds and leaves scattered around them, and the soldier who got hit in the shoulder squatted down. Realizing that the situation had changed, the snipers turned pale.

「...? We are moving in the forest, but their volley caught up with us!」

「Prone down! It’s a firing line salvo, we can’t lift our heads under such firing density!」

The snipers prone down to dodge the bullets. They had no choice but to crawl, and it would be hard to catch up with the enemy that had moved ahead. When they reach the next engagement area, the enemy would have gotten out of range.

By using the agility of section level movements, they could move into the best position before the enemy does and engage them. However, the new tactic they had been using didn’t work this time— The anxiety of this fact hit them along with the volley fire from the mountain path.

「Damn it! They saw through us...!」

「— That’s...!」

Torway sensed something was wrong from the way the enemy was walking boldly on the path. His subordinate who was observing through a telescope shouted in a shrill tone.

「Commanding Officer, the enemy is advancing in a firing line! They are building up momentum! Their suppressing fire is keeping our sniping in check...」

In contrast with the soldier who was reporting, the enemy advanced with sure and confident steps. The jade-eyed youth looked at the enemy with stern eyes and grit his teeth.

「There's a bigger problem… They are not afraid of the dark. They saw through our deployment!」

「

Yah

*— In a straight up fight, the side with more soldiers will have the advantage. That's the norm on the battlefield, boss of the snipers I have yet to met.」

Jean watched the units suppressing the enemy's retaliatory fire and advancing deeper with a fearless smile.

「We have been held back here by more than 3 hours. Trying to act like an invisible Phantom after so long is asking for too much when facing an opponent like me. That is more than enough time to clearly see the things we couldn't see.」

Phantom moved quietly in the dark forest. However— the white-haired officer's eyes with outstanding analysis skill and imagination could clearly see their movement.

「Sniper units in groups smaller than a section— I admit that is a threat. But since their goal is to delay us, given the terrain, there would be a given pattern in their deployment and movement. By deducing the best answer, and working back from the spots where our soldiers had been shot thus far, I can predict the mentality and personality of the enemy within a margin of error.」

All the time spent up to this moment was to find this answer. Jean was not a kind idiot that would let the enemy keep up their shroud

of invisibility.

「Sniper boss, your ideal is probably for every soldier to act independently, and cooperate at a higher level than troopers of the past to keep up the fight. My home nation Kioka had an ideology of respecting the independence of the citizens and minimizing governing prowess, known as 『Small Government』. I am frankly impressed that you came up with a military version of this. However, humans are social creatures by nature and act in groups. For the military, the action of the organized soldiers will inevitably reflect the intent of the commander.」

<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small_government>

Jean not only saw through the positions of the enemy hiding in the dark, he also saw through their thinking. The Insomniac Brilliant General had completely grasped the nature of the new generation sniper unit nurtured by the Imperial elite Torway Remeon.

「The impression of your troop deployment feels more gentle and timid than others, and the resolve to suppress everything to step on the battlefield— Something like that. Interesting. An image that isn't very soldier-like.」

Jean often reminded himself not to lose himself to his innocent curiosity towards the unknown with no regards for friend or foe. But after meeting Anarai Khan, that tendency had grown stronger. That was why he felt joy in pummeling this foe who was worthy of praise.

「I hope he is willing to be taken prisoner alive. There can never be too much good help—!」

＊

On the other hand, in the basecamp commanded by Brigadier General Sazarf, his forces that had linked up with Empress Chamille's troop were waiting anxiously for their allies' return.

「— I see them! The vanguard of friendlies!」

A soldier watching the east yelled loudly. Sazarf rushed out of his command tent and confirmed it personally with his telescope, then ordered his men:

「Good, remove the barricade and let them in! Field hospital, get ready to take in casualties! On the double, more will be coming soon!」

「Hah! Hah! — We finally made it—」

Matthew finally returned with his exhausted men. After going up the narrow path to the high grounds, he was surprised to see his Monarch.

「— Your Majesty...? Why are you here!?」

Chamille approached him with her black robes fluttering in the wind, and said with a serious expression.

「I was planning to reinforce your group, but got snagged in a trap.」

「Even so, there's no reason for you to idle here! Brigadier General Sazarf, why didn't you form an escort unit for Her Majesty to leave!? The enemy will be coming here soon...!」

Matthew forgot about his exhaustion and pressed his superior for an answer. But before he could hear the reason from Sazarf, the subject of his worry said sharply:

「Don't overstep your bounds, Matthew Tetzirich. Only I can decide where to go and what to do. You just need to worry about breaking through the current quagmire.」

As a vassal, it was natural for him to be worried, and being refuted made the youth seethe in anger. Chamille pretended not to notice and quietly changed the topic.

「The soldiers at the rear of the group are probably under attack by the Kioka forces and the Alderamin Holy Army. Given the forces you have on hand, is the rear guard Lieutenant Colonel Torway?」

「... Yes. If not for his timely reinforcements, more soldiers would have died.」

「That's the point of sending them in. When can we expect the rest of your group?」

「All of them should reach in the afternoon two days later… And the enemy is projected to reach at about the same time.」

Because of their earlier argument, Matthew added in the hope that she would realize how dangerous the situation was. However, the Empress just nodded and turned as if that was only natural.

「Start a war conference. I already have the outlines of a plan in mind— but I still want to hear your views, Major Matthew.」

Four days after Matthew's group arrived, the Kioka and Alderamin Holy Army led by Jean arrived before the enemy basecamp.

「—
Hum
, I see, they set up their camp here.」

He muttered as he surveyed the terrain that stretched tens of km from north to south, with perilous cliffs that were over 90 degrees in angle. A crude cliff face sheltered Jean's group, and he could catch glimpses of Imperial soldiers scouting for enemies— When the top ground layer was tough while the bottom layer was soft, the bottom would get eroded faster by the weather and form such a terrain over time.

「Instead of a hill and valley— this is closer to being a tableland. The only path up to the highgrounds is the narrow path to the south, and it is already blockaded.」

「

Syah

*. We can go around this place, but that would take more than 3 days. The enemy will probably flee westward given that time.」

After confirming the relative position of both sides with the map in his mind, the white-haired officer continued analyzing the situation.

「

*Mum**

— speaking of which, the enemy commander-in-chief is rather brave. They could have waited for their allies closer to the entrance to the mountains, which would be a better plan, but he still stepped deep into the mountains. This showed his resolve to save as many soldiers as possible.」

Jean raised the corners of his lips satisfactory, complimenting the enemy's tenacity despite being the underdog.

「The enemy is not beaten yet. Don't let your guard down, Miara.」

Jean warned his adjutant sharply and turned to the Scientist diagonally behind him.

「Oh right— What’s wrong, Professor? You have been watching the sky for a while now.」

「Yes. There is a rarely seen bird flying in the air.」

Anarai Khan answered with his eyes upwards. This old sage wouldn’t miss the tiniest detail that most people would ignore.

「That bird has been circling above us for a while now. There shouldn’t be any large birds native to this area, so that intrigued me.」

Jean followed Anarai’s curious gaze and quickly identified the rare bird that the old man was talking about.

「... Oh! Your eyes are sharp, Professor, that’s the pet bird of the 『Great Mother of White Wings』 — Misai, over here! Come down!」

He shouted and whistled to get the bird’s attention, and succeeded in getting it to fly down. A few seconds later, the large bird landed with a large gust of wind. The soldiers backed away on reflex, and only Jean raised his hand and approached it intimately as if he was welcoming a friend.

「You are acting as a messenger, huh, that’s a big help. I will read and reply to the letter right now, please wait a while.」

After that, he untied the letter on Misai’s feet. On the other hand, Anarai was not interested in the message, and inspected the

creature before him instead.

「Hawk… Condor...! No, this is an Osprey. To think I will see a seabird in the treacherous Grand Arfatra Mountains.」

The old man lowered his body and leaned forward. Misai probably sensed danger from his eyes and adopted a wary posture.

「Did this Osprey land here because it recognized you? Not just that, it's waiting obediently for you to write a reply, interesting. Perhaps I need to reevaluate the intelligence level of birds.」

Anarai committed himself completely into his observations and inspected his subject from the front, back, sides and diagonal. This scene made Jean smile awkwardly.

「Professor, don't tease it too much. Misai is a very proud creature, it will peck you if you went overboard.」

「I understand, just a bit more… Gwahh!」

Right after Jean warned him, Anarai had to dodge the sharp beaks of the bird. Miara laughed out loud, but the white-haired officer beside her frowned.

「... The Empress is with them. The situation has gotten a little troublesome.」

「Huh—? Jean, what...」

Jean ordered his soldiers to prepare his stationery and table, then swiftly pened a reply. He didn't hesitate and finished in just a few minutes.

「...
Yah
*, I have written the reply. Return this to your mistress, Misai.」

He tied the letter onto the bird's leg, and Misai cawed impatiently before taking to the sky. Ignoring Anarai who looked disappointed, Miara asked his superior:

「Finished already? What did you write on the letter?」

「Nothing special. Just our current situation, size of our forces and the future battle plans.」

「You even wrote down the plan? Before chairing a war conference?
」

「Given the situation before us, there isn't any need to seek the opinion of the staff officers. The Empress' presence was unexpected, but it won't affect the big picture. That's because— when the enemy decided to set up their base on the tableland, the results was already clear.」

The white-haired officer said as if the reason was obvious, then returned his gaze to the tableland.

「Spread the men out before the highgrounds and apply pressure. We will then wait for the opportunity to come.」

「After two years in captivity, this can't be helped.」

On the other hand, the 「Great Mother of White Wings」 couldn't help complaining after arriving at the other side of the tableland where the Imperial forces were based.

「The top management asked us for a prison break, so we did. Climbing up the mountains is harsh for sailors, but we can manage if it is just this one time… But asking us to tackle these issues one after another is too reckless. What do you think, Greg?」

Elulufay laid on a smooth boulder exhaustively and asked her vassal who had a scary face. Marine Commander Greg Ayuzadori nodded with a shrug.

「We have to look after 10,000 refugees, so I feel the same. The Prime Minister seems to be thinking that we are just lazing around in the Empire for the last two years.」

「That's right. So, how are they doing?」

「They were full of drive when they just scaled the mountains, but their passion has cooled off now, and their attitude is wavering. They

want to hide behind and leave the fighting to us.」

「Yes, that's good. Much better than them charging recklessly to the frontlines. We are not used to fighting in the hills, having armed civilians mixed in will just create more chaos. We will handle the fighting then.」

She was lying down as they conversed, and sat up at this point. Misai then landed on her arm. Elulufay was happy to see her pet bird return, and looked at its feet.

「Welcome back, Misai. So you did see Jean.」

She untied the letter and read it right away, then sighed in relief.

「... Hmm, looks like our hard days are over. Greg, can you smile to show you are happy?」

「Like this?」

Greg opened his mouth slit that reached right to his ear. The Great Mother of White Wings smiled and admired the vicious face that could make any child cry.

「Your smile is as charming as ever. Tell the good news to the men with this face.」

「Got it～」

The Marine Commander turned around at her urging. The seamen screamed wherever he went, and Elulufay curled up her body and dozed off with the screams as her lullaby.

Because of the personality of their commander, the unit under the 「Great Mother of White Wings」 remained cheerful despite their arduous situation. And in contrast, a battalion that just arrived at the Imperial basecamp could only be described as gloomy.

「... The Sniper battalion has returned.」

The unit commander passed through the blockade and mechanically saluted the allies receiving him. A pudgy youth then jogged towards him with ragged breath.

「Torway, you alright?」

The first thing he asked was the safety of his friend, but the jade-eyed youth didn't raise his head.

「Because of the mounting losses, we have to cease independent operations… How disgraceful. I was planning to stall them for two more days...!」

His fingers around the stock of his Wind Gun were trembling slightly. Faced with Torway's strong self reproach, Matthew didn't know

what to say.

You already bought us the minimal number of days we agreed on before setting off, so don't be too hard on yourself— Matthew knew very well, that Torway won't listen to that. What was torturing Torway was the high standards he set for himself. With the vermillion-haired girl and dark-haired youth gone, he was demanding himself to take over the obligation of leading the Imperial military in their place. Without anyone saying anything, Torway put all the blame on himself.

The slightly plump youth had no words, and the Empress approached from behind him to speak in his place.

「Don't be frustrated, Torway, you have completed your mission. Report to headquarters, I have to brief you on our plans.」

Chamille informed him calmly, then turned and left. The jade-eyed youth followed with silent steps, and Matthew was right behind him with a bitter face.

「Our plan is simple.」

Standing before the officers, the Empress explained using a map.

「For the Kioka and Aldera coalition Army coming from the east, this tableland is a barrier. We have blockaded the direct path into the tableland, and can hold out for two or three days easily. We will use this chance to decimate the forces in the west— the escaped prisoners and the devotees group, then leave the mountains with

haste.」

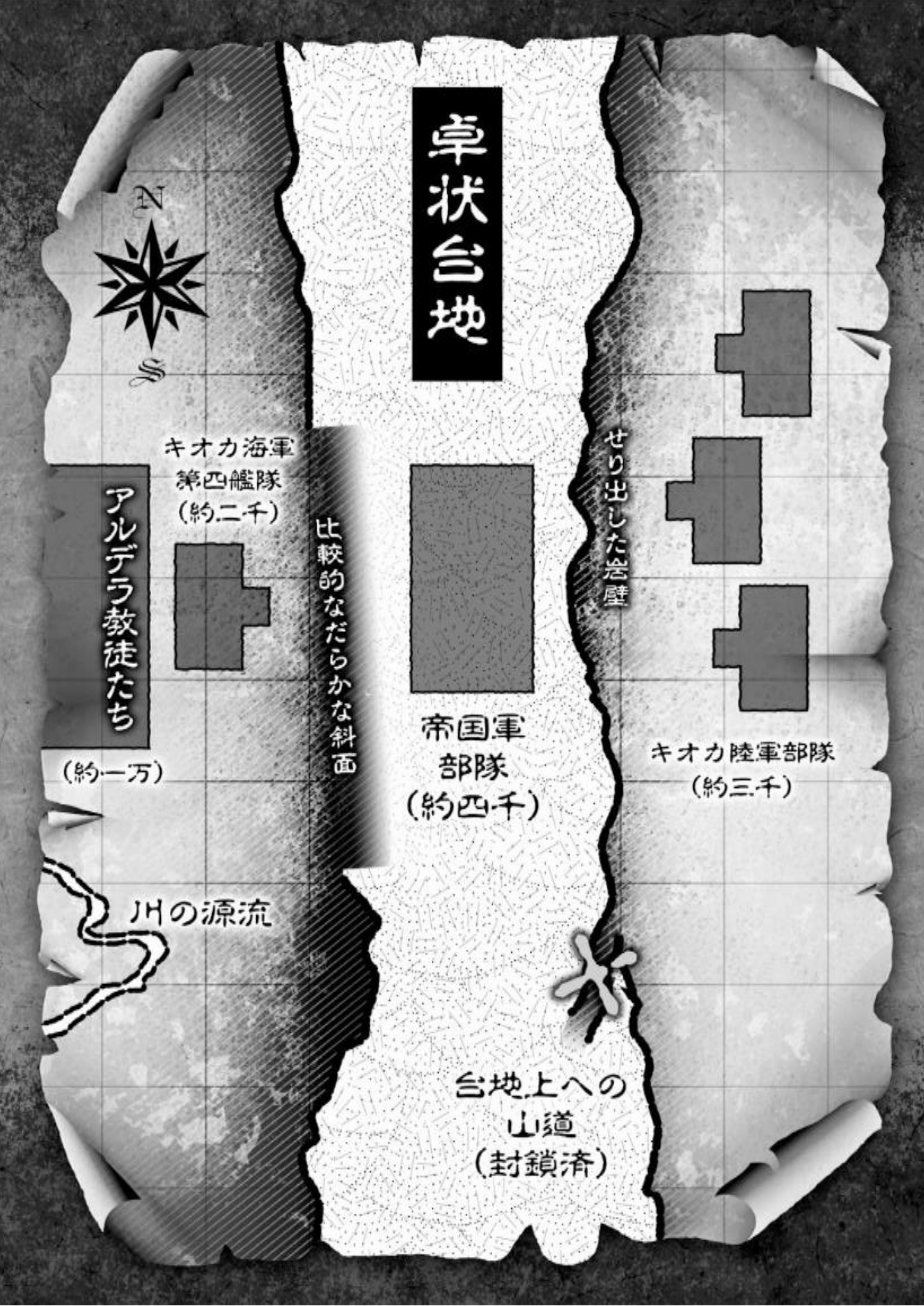
She summarized the plan in just tens of seconds. On behalf of how all the officers felt, Matthew’s face started to cramp.

「... Your Majesty, you want to decimate them?」

「I did. Is there any other course of action when facing a hostile enemy blocking my path?」

Chamille declared nonchalantly. In the silent tent, only her voice tinted with murderous intent quivered in the air.

「I will be in overall command of this plan. We will launch the attack at daybreak tomorrow— when most of the devotees are still asleep. The former Kioka prisoners of war aside, crushing the other enemies will be as easy as cutting down strawman.」


卓状台地
N
S
キオカ海軍
第四艦隊
（約二千）
アルデラ教徒たち
（約一万）
比較的なだらかな斜面
帝国軍
部隊
（約四千）
せり出した岩壁
キオカ陸軍部隊
（約三千）
川の源流
台地上への
山道
（封鎖済）

Matthew grit his teeth and walked forth, his gaze clashing against those golden eyes.

「You want to kill the citizens… like cutting down strawman? Even though our goal is to bring them back?」

「That will be right if they are just wandering off. But since they took up arms and show us hostility, I will not hesitate to treat them as enemies.」

「That's part of Kioka's plan too! They give Wind Guns to the devotees forced to their wit's end, and coerce them into an armed uprising! If we murder our fellow countrymen, that will be playing right into the enemy's hands?」

The youth crossed the line of advising the Empress and was directly rebuking her. But she just shook her head with a serious face.

「I have made up my name. The order is given in my name, and I will take the responsibility for it.」

She ignored all attempts to persuade her with that one sentence. The Empress' reply was too cruel in response to Matthew's appeal on behalf of the devotees. Rage burned in the youth's eyes. At the same time, sadness of equal parts also lingered within him.

「... I can't carry out this order. Defending the nation against external enemies is the duty of a soldier. This is the only time I feel the same way as Mitokazuruku. An army that massacre its citizens

wilfully shouldn't exist...!」

There was an uproar in the tent, and Sazarf who was looking for a chance to intervene turned pale. When Matthew clearly stepped over the line, all emotions drained from the Empress' face.

「—Major Matthew Tetzirich. I have a high evaluation of you, and hope that you will grow into a man capable of shouldering the army in the future. That was why I planned to elevate you for this investigative trip. However—」

She drew the sabre on her waist and pointed the tip at the pudgy youth.

「— If you refuse to abide by my decision and continue to defy me, I won't let your disobedience slide.」

The Empress coldly gave her ultimatum. With the blade pointed at him, Matthew's eyes quickly turned cold.

「— You want to cut off my head with that blade?」

He parted his dry lips and said with the strongest sense of irony… That sabre was wielded by the vermillion-haired girl in the past and had saved the Knights Corp from dire situations countless times. The youth clenched his trembling fists and closed his eyes.

「Kill me then. If you can do that… Then you are no longer the Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik I knew.」

A despairing silence fell between them. No one had the courage to speak and mediate— because they understood that this argument wasn't limited to just this one time, but the friction of the last two years being brought to the surface. They had to accept that the Master-vassal relationship between them was at its limits.



「Y-Your Majesty—」

Sazarf understood all that, but he still squeezed his voice out with a suicidal resolve— at this moment, an out of place cheerful voice echoed in the tense tent.

「Hmm hmm～ everyone, tea is ready! Uwah! Uwah! —Ahh?」

Haro passed by the officers towards Chamille and Matthew, and suddenly lost her balance, spilling the tea pot in her hands. The steaming hot tea spilled onto Matthew's calf, and he opened his eyes wide open because of the burns.

「It burns～～～～!」

「Huhh? S-Sorry! I will ice it for you!」

Haro quickly called out her partner water Sprite Mia to create ice. Sazarf who was watching stiffly all this while saw the chance to change the mood in the tent.

「...Major Haro, sorry to trouble you, but please bring Major Matthew out. The coming battles will be tense, and a scalding might lead to more serious problems if left unattended.」

「O-Okay! Pardon my intrusion!」

Haro took Matthew’s hand and left after apologizing profusely. She put on a ditzy act to fudge over the clash between the two. The woman with Haro’s face giggled in her heart.

— *It’s still too early, Princess.*

And of course, she wasn’t doing this out of kindness. Deepening the animosity between Chamille and Matthew went against her goal, so she stopped it. That was all.

— *You need to accumulate more. The end you are hoping for isn’t so cheap that it will happen here.*

She patiently sowed the seeds of discord in the fertile soil of human relationships, nurturing them carefully to stop them from wilting. She imagined the seeds blooming at the absolute worst time as she passionately poured in her twisted emotions.

— *You really make me worry. Fufufu!*

「... Damn it! … Damn it! Damn! Damn...!」

After his light burns were treated, Matthew stayed inside his personal tent and kept cursing out.

「— Calm down, Major Matthew. I know how you feel, but the massacre isn't set in stone yet.」

A while later, Sazarf came to check on him after his war conference. He said to the youth sitting on his bed with his head hung low.

「I have permission from Her Majesty to assign my men as the vanguard to break through the west, allowing us to seize the initiative on the frontlines. The Kioka might use the devotees as human shields, but...」

Sazarf tried to not upset Matthew, but he quickly reached his limits. He understood there were many holes in his arguments, and changed tracks with a sigh.

「...No, I have to make this clear. If the devotees become a target during the battle, I will fire upon them without any mercy.」

「......!」

Matthew looked at his superior in shock. Sazarf quickly added:

「That's only limited to the beginning. When the devotees run away in fear, we will switch targets to the Kioka former prisoners of war. It's regrettable, but the current situation… the more we care for the devotees, the more losses we will suffer.」

Sazarf forced his subordinate to see the harsh truth. He believed this was his responsibility as a superior.

「Protecting Her Majesty is a given, and I want to bring as many of my men back to the Empire alive. I want to achieve that even if I have to kill my own citizens… Empress Chamille took on overall command because she had the resolve to shoulder all the blame and losses for this battle. You know that, right?」

Matthew looked down and bit his lips— That's right, deep down he knew that the Empress' harsh decision was the right move. And he didn't have the right to say anything about that.

「The situation deteriorated this badly because we messed up from the start… We can't complain even if we died here. I'm not telling you to accept this, but you must have the resolve to dirty your hands.」

「......」

「We will start the plan tomorrow at daybreak. Compared to experienced campers like us, the Kioka seamen and the refugees should find camping in the wild much more draining… But if the battle drags on, we will have a tough time too.」

Having said all that he wanted to, Sazarf quietly turned around. He judged that his subordinate would need some time to get his feelings in order— when he was about to exit the tent, he remembered something and added:

「You should learn to do whatever it takes to survive… I order you to rest until 2 am tomorrow. At least forget about the devotees for a while, and think about your family or a girl you fancy.」

Sazarf passed through the curtains at the entrance and left for real this time. Matthew stayed in the tent alone, since surviving until the next day was not a guarantee, his superior's words made him think of home.

「... Dad… Mom...」

Matthew's nostalgic hometown flashed across his mind. The crops sparkling with the morning dew and the gentle smiles of his parents. And also— the face of a girl, which made the youth grip the compass talisman hidden behind his shirt.

「......Pommy ......」

Late that night. As if to mimic the nickname of their commander-in-chief, the Kioka army at the foot of the cliff was bustling around with no regards for sleep.

「—
Mum
*. The enemy seems to be planning for an attack at day break.」

Jean looked up at the enemy base some distance away from the cliff and stroked his chin.

「We need to rush our job too. How's the sappers' progress?」

「Yes, we will probably know right about—」

Miara looked around when she was asked, and an officer jogged towards them.

「Huff! Puff! ...Reporting! We have completed the inspection! We can start pumping on your orders!」

After receiving the report he was waiting anxiously for, the white-haired officer's smile deepened.

「
*Syool**
— Let's get started immediately. But any mistakes will cause a big accident, fire is prohibited in the work area.」

「Yes Sir, we will execute the plan meticulously!」

「Also, arrange for note takers not participating in battle. There are few instances of Dynamic Air being used in such a way, so this will be valuable data. Can you find someone suitable from your unit?」

「Yes Sir! I will assign someone who can make meticulous records!」

That subordinate turned and jogged off after receiving these additional orders. Jean was not stressed at all, since he could even

take note of things not directly related to combat. When he took out a map and compared it to the terrain before him, Anarai found something that interested him and poked his head out.

「Hmm, this will be an interesting experiment. From my predictions… there, there and there will remain intact?」

「
Yah
*, I think this area will be fine too. We can't see inside with the naked eye, and we lack experience in actual application in this realm too.」

「Let's make records too. Looks like tomorrow will be a busy day.」

Jean nodded in agreement and watched his men go about their work energetically.

The officer who received Jean's orders ran back down the cliff and observed the scene lit by his Luminous Sprite's Lantern.

「...Ugh.」

Before him were piles of sand, and an even leveled cave dug right into the base of the tableland. To let the soldiers carry out their work, parts of the cave were exposed, but it would be covered with sand once they finished their work today. Not just that, there was a wooden structure inside, which couldn't have been erected in a short period of time.

「The Major General has granted permission! All sections move on to the final phase!」

The soldiers wield their shovels on that order, covering the gaps they dug to inspect the interior. When the spaces had been sealed securely, only dozens of tubes made from tree sap were connected from the inside to the Fire Sprites of the soldiers outside. This made it easy for the Fire Sprite to inject Dynamic Air into the cave through their 「Fire Holes」.

「Good— Start pumping!」

On their officer's command, the soldiers started working with their Sprite partners to release Dynamic Air. These were sent through the soft tubes into the enclosed cave, and started accumulating.

The next morning. On the tableland illuminated by the faint light from the sunrise, the Imperial soldiers stood in tidy formation, ready to charge the enemy.

「—It is time.」

Chamille who was commanding from the rear of the formation announced stoically that the moment has come, and confirmed with her vassal standing by her side.

「Is everything ready, Brigadier General Sazarf?」

「... Yes, you can start whenever you are ready.」

Sazarf answered and looked behind him— to the east of the base, the opposite direction of the enemy forces they were attempting to break through. Matthew's unit assigned to the rearguard was deployed there… This was a necessary arrangement to keep the enemy to the east in check, but Matthew being assigned to this task reminded everyone of the tense atmosphere during the war conference yesterday.

「Good— Listen up, soldiers. The Katjvarna Empire 28th Generation Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik hereby decree.」

Empress declared fluently. This was no simple order, but a decree to murder and expose this tyrant in broad daylight.

「— Phew...」

She closed her eyes and sucked in air deep into her lungs. Two years ago— when she killed her father to seize the throne, she made an oath that there wouldn't be a shred of righteousness in the path she will take. For Chamille who made that decision, all the sins and responsibility of war rested solely on her.

She would not leave that burden to anyone else— fueled by that determination, she roared.

「Everyone you see before you are all our enemies— destroy them all!」

「「「「「「Wooooahhhh!」」」」」」

With their boots stamping the ground, the soldiers advanced as one. Moving forth to sweep away the enemy and their own citizens.

「—Oh～ho! It's starting! They are charging right at us!」

「Of course, they have nowhere to run now— engage the enemy!」

At the same time, the seamen led by Elulufay Tenerexilla immediately fought back.

They have kept their fighting spirit up because of Elulufay's presence, but fear still flashed across the faces of the seamen. Great Mother felt this couldn't be helped, and stated the difference between her army and the enemies.

「The equipment and training level are too different. We erected a blockade for our peace of mind… Sigh, it can probably just hold for ten minutes.」

「If we use the refugees as human shields, we might be able to double that.」

「That's true, but when we switch to the offensive, they will become a burden. So this is the correct answer.」

The only ones who could jest in a situation like this were Elulufay and Greg. With the soldiers around her looking at her with pleadful eyes,

the 「Great Mother of White Wings」 smiled gently.

「Everyone, don’t worry. I know Jean Arkinex very well, and he is not a man who will fail at a time like this.」

Elulufay said without any hesitation. She had no doubt that the white-haired officer who had reached her rank and would probably surpass her, was the messiah in this situation.

「He is a hero. When the lives of his comrades are at stake, he will show his prowess to the fullest extent.」

The Imperial forces descended the tableland and set off westwards. The leading units were already engaging in a shootout against the Kioka seamen, and they clearly held the upper hand.

「... Good, their retaliatory attack is within our expectations! It will work, we just need to push through!」

The sound of compressed air exploding was deafening. The soldiers used the newest Air Rifles model to lay down suppressing fire on the enemy still using old Air Rifles. The difference in equipment led to an inevitable result, and they didn’t even want to give the enemy a chance to stall for time. Sazarf stood on the battlefield and solemnly swore to bring his men back to the plains alive.

As if to make light of his resolve, a loud boom came from behind him shortly after the battle ensured.

「—? What's going on?」

He turned around to look, and saw dust flying on the other side of the tablelands. The confused Sazarf stood stiffly in place, and the Empress beside him turned even more tense.

「... Ughh...」

After the loud explosion and tremor, a sense of vertigo followed right after. A battered soldier groaned and opened his eyes slightly.

「...Ugh… What, happened...」

His vision was blurred because of the pain, and the dust in the air slowly cleared away, and eventually revealed the sky dyed red by the sunrise. No, not just the sky. His field of vision included a cliff. It had crumbled beyond recognition— but he was looking up at the tablelands he was standing on just moments ago.

「W-Why...!」

The soldier couldn't understand what was happening and tried desperately to sit up. But before he could do that, he sensed a large number of footsteps had passed him by.

「... A-Ahhh...!」

Then he saw it. Behind the dust cloud that was settling, around the spot he was at— Countless Kioka soldiers were climbing up a slope.

「— What—」

A similarly chaotic scene developed above the cliff. Matthew looked in shock at the crumbling grounds just meters before him, still sitting on his butt and disorientated.

「— What's, going on—」

The scene before him was beyond his comprehension, negating the adaptive instincts he had honed over the past two years. That was to be expected— going by military norm, the terrain couldn't be changed in an instant. There wasn't any torrential rain to loosen the foundations, so the ground that was before him just now couldn't have collapsed in a blink of an eye. As if to mock his common sense, the terrain changed right before Matthew's eyes.

If possible, he wanted to just sit there and space out. However, the presence of the enemy below pulled him back to reality. Matthew quickly got on his feet and yelled at his men.

「The enemy is coming...! Send out the reserves immediately! Protect the vanguard unit's flank on the cliffside and hold the line! The cliff blocking the enemy's advance has vanished!」

「—
Hum

, the performance is mediocre. I give it 70 points.」

Jean calmly evaluated the results as he observed the partial collapse of the enemy base.

「Even without Blast Cannons, we can still use Dynamic Air this way. We have forged the path for our soldiers to go through. If we level the overhanging cliffs, the tableland will be no different from a hill.」

The results weren't too different from his expectations, so this was no surprise for him. No, not just that— the lack of anything that might subvert his expectations disappointed him.

「Anyway— the Imperial Army is too careless. We have control over this area for over two years since the battle of the Northern territories. They might be at their wits end in finding a terrain suitable for a defensive battle, but not suspecting any traps from behind is too optimistic.」

「— Rear guard unit, go around to the edge of the cliff! Stop the enemy coming from the east!」

She had not grasped the whole situation yet, but Chamille still gave the most adequate order. She only understood that her opponent had shaved off a corner of the tableland through some means. She gritted her teeth to suppress the uneasiness in her heart.

「The enemy shouldn't have any Blast Cannons...! Do they have a different contraption to utilize Dynamic Air? And it's powerful

enough to change the terrain in an instant...!」

As she was thinking about that, a battle had broken out in the east of the base against enemy troops attempting to scale the highgrounds. Sazarf snapped back to his senses at that scene, and said with a stiff face.

「Your Majesty, grave news...! This situation is no different than being surrounded on a hill!」

「Tch...!」

「—See, it's just as I said.」

Elulufay shrugged as this was only natural as the enemy fell into disarray because of what happened behind them.

「Keep firing. There's no need to consider further attacks. We just need to give them the sensation of being attacked from both sides, and the pincer attack will be a success. Just keep the sound of gunshots going continuously.」

Her instructions pulled back the sailors who were stunned by the change in events to reality. She grunted.

「It will only be a matter of time now. We need to be wary of the enemy breaking through forcefully if they get desperate. If that happens, just stall them for a while then let them pass. Leave the pursuit to Jean and the others.」

「They might detach a unit to escort the Empress and escape. Shall we use this chance to set up an encirclement net?」

「No need, Ario has instructed us to let the Empress go. She is on our side— whether she is aware of it or not.」

Elulufay said without any warmth in her voice. Greg showed a flash of unhappiness on his face.

「How disgusting. Even the Empress of a hostile nation is being played like a damn fiddle by the Prime Minister.」

「I don't plan to be manipulated by him… That being said, I'm not confident of escaping from him either, that's what makes him scary.」

The Great Mother of White Wings sighed, and caressed the feathers of Misai beside her.

「Your Majesty, the situation will only get worse! Please break through the enemy forces while our losses are still light!」

With the enemy closing on both sides, Sazarf's voice turned shrill from anxiety. Chamille recognized that she was caught between two hard choices, and asked his subordinate:

「If we descend the hill while taking fire from behind… How many will die when we reached the foot of the hill?」

「... I can't gauge. However… If we don't, our forces will be wiped out here.」

Sazarf was at his wit's end, and could only answer with that. The Empress' expression was bitter. Should she forcibly break through and suffer terrible losses? Or choose a retreat that risked wiping out her army? With no time to consider these choices in depth, she

looked to the distance in hope of finding an answer to her predicament.

「——?」

At this moment, the Empress noticed an abnormality. Behind the sailors who had erected a makeshift blockade, in the corner where the devotees were hiding away from the battle.

「— Wait. That's—」

「The battle has started...」「... How dangerous...」「W-We can hide, right? It's fine to leave it to the Kiokians, right...?」

The devotees held token weapons and hid in the shades of the boulders as they watched the battle timidly. They were near a valuable water source on the mountains, which is upstream of a river that flows into the plains.

「Camping outside long term is tiring… I wish there is a place with a roof and bed for me to sleep properly.」

The water flowing slowly through the gaps in the rocks was closer to being a stream than a bog. This didn't mean the water source was drying up, this was natural at the start of the stream. But things were different downstream. After several streams converge, the amount of water would gradually increase. During rainy seasons, the river would get wider and increase its permeation of the ground. Conversely, when the water level sinks and the riverbed was exposed, it would form a natural path.

There wasn't much water here, but they were glad that they were near a water source. A devotee filled up a canteen his friend passed to him, then looked downstream on a whim.

「...? I think that's… Footsteps...?」

The men didn’t think there were more people in his group in that direction and furrowed his brows. It was just after daybreak, and a light fog was hanging in the air. He narrowed his eyes in an attempt to see through the white fog— his vision was then suddenly filled with shadowy figures in military garb.

「... Huh?」

That group ignored the man and advanced through the rocky roads easily as if they were traveling on flat grounds. When he realized those people weren’t phantoms, but mortal Imperial soldiers, his companions behind started shrieking.

「What! Eee! Ahh—」

「I-Imperial soldiers...? Where did they come from!?」

Elulufay quickly realized something was amiss behind the devotees.

「— Something is up behind us! Greg!」

「I’m on my way!」

The fearsome-looking Marine Commander immediately took action. He and his men went to the rear, and the devotees who were there moved towards them instead. Greg pushed aside the flood of people and observed the situation.

「The devotees are scrambling here with ghastly faces. It’s probably a sneak attack by a detachment unit— but since we didn’t detect them up til now, they must be small in numbers. Boys, engage the enemy!」

The sailors fixed bayonets onto their Wind Guns and crossbows as ordered. Greg and his men hyped up their fighting spirit to engage

the enemy that wasn't in sight yet, then noticed the abnormality in their bodies.

「... What, is this? Why...」

His hand holding his spear was quivering a little, and goosebumps spread from his hands to his entire body. His mind felt icy, completely different from his usual hyped attitude at the prospect of a coming battle. And what irked him was that he remembered this sensation. He experienced this once in the past.

The scene he saw next proved mercilessly that his instinct was spot on.

「— What—」

The enemy swarmed in. A sword flashed across the men in front. Severed limbs flew into the air. Ahead of him his men died before they could put up any resistance.

「—Seh!」

Seeing the dual wielding warrior— Greg understood everything and froze on the spot.

「— The strongest sword, 【Igsem】—!」

Engaging him was impossible. 「Igsem of the Sword」 led his unit and decimated the sailors at the blockade in an instant and left. A sense of impending death brushed by him, and Greg shivered from the bottom of his heart. He only survived because he wasn't on the path the Dual blades were taking.

「Fall back! Fall back fall back fall back～!」

Witnessing despair for the second time in his life, his thoughts turned straight to fleeing. Greg gathered the men around him and

immediately rushed back to his commander. Without a word, he grabbed the shocked Great Mother of White Wings.

「Uwah! —W-What's wrong, Greg? What's happening!」

「A monster is charging here! We are using borrowed outdated weapons, and this isn't the sea, engaging him will be suicide! We have to run!」

「Monster...? But the enemy numbers are limited, right? I don't know where they came from, but the main mountain paths are under our control! We won't lose that easily—」

「The problem isn't their numbers! We can't fight a melee battle against him!」

The fear of the vermillion-haired girl had been branded onto his mind, which led to his decision on the mountain. With the Great Mother of White Wings in his arms, Greg started running immediately without any hesitation.

「—Seh～～—!」

The vermillion haired sword demon leading the way cut open a bloody path. The way he fought valiantly was the personification of the Igsem. On a closer look, there was something mixed in too. More accurately speaking, a person was clinging onto his back.

「......!」

That man hung on desperately to the sword demon with his hand that was missing a finger. As he clinged on the back of the sword demon, he observed the battle, then gave his orders for the next course of action.

「—The enemy is in disarray! Go straight for the high grounds!」

「Yes Sir—!」

The man immediately started running on that instruction. His men also sprinted after him to not fall behind.



When Chamille saw the sailors trying to stop the assailants, and got cut down for their efforts, she was certain that this was to her advantage.

「— Allies, they are allies! We have to reinforce them! Torway!」

「Yes Mdm!」

The snipers set off to reinforce on the Empress' orders. The mysterious allies were passing through the enemy formation and heading to the tableland, and the enemy's shots were approaching from behind them. But the pursuers were stopped by the precise shooting of Torway and his men. Since the threat behind them had been suppressed, the allies made a beeline for the tableland.

「Yes, this way! Go straight up!」

After going up the long slope, the soldiers finally reached the tableland. Sazarf pushed his subordinates aside and walked to the front, searching for the commander of the new force.

「You guys came at just the right time…! But where did you hail from? The name and unit of the commander—」

Sazarf stopped his questions. Because a vermillion haired man a head taller than him was standing staunchly before him.

「... F-Field Marshal...?」

「Incorrect.」

In contrast with Sazarf's surprise, Solvenares Igsem refuted that curtly. This confused him further, and a person got down from the sword demon's back.

「Honorary Field Marshal Igsem is my deputy, I'm the commander. Because of the terrain, we can't bring our horses over— Long time no see, Major Sazarf. No, I heard you got promoted to Brigadier General.」

The youth took a clutch from a subordinate nearby and stood up straight, then saluted with his left hand and said 「Pardon me.」 As he needed to hold the clutch with the hand opposite from his injured left leg, he had to salute with his left hand. Sazarf opened his eyes wide and started to quiver.

「My unit is from the Imperial autonomous all region Stronghold, the『Rising Sun Regiment』. The name's Ikuta Solork, I bought a battalion of infantry here to support on a whim, please allow me to link up with your main unit.」

When struck by joy and surprise, people tend to blank out and become speechless. As Sazarf stood there and spaced out, a jade-eyed youth behind him rushed over. Just like Sazarf, he could only say the name of his friend he hadn't seen for two years.

「Ik-kun...!」

「It's been a while, Torway. Sorry— can you let me pass for now?」

After the dark-haired youth apologized, he walked past the soldiers with his clutch. He was dragging his left leg a little, but he still quickened his pace— and found his target in no time.

「... S-Solork...?」

Facing the youth who shouldn't be here, time completely stopped for the Empress. The scene before seemed so surreal that she suspected her own sanity and blinked a few times.

As if to brush away her unnecessary doubt, the youth reached out gently.

「— You are safe.」

His left hand that was missing a finger brushed gently across her cheek. Chamille couldn't move. She was afraid that this dream would end if she did, and could do nothing other than accepting his finger tips.

「Sorry for being late. Sorry for letting you take on all this alone. It will be fine now. I won't let anyone harm you again.」

Ikuta Solork said to her, then opened his arms and held her tightly. That warmth and heartbeat gently envelope her solitude… She used her entire body to feel his endless care and love. The girl Chamille who was living in this moment accepted him from the bottom of her heart.

「Along with her will that still lives on, I swear to protect you from the evils of this world.」

「—Enemy reinforcements? From the west?」

Jean thought for a few seconds after receiving this report, then opened the map as if he thought of something. Miara opened her eyes wide in surprise, as if she was reacting on his behalf.

「That's impossible— where did their reinforcements come from? The mountain paths around this area are all under the surveillance of our hot air balloon, they couldn't have escaped detection.」

She frankly expressed how absurd this situation was. However, the white-haired officer who was staring at the map soon found the answer.

「... Marsh...」

「Huh?」

「... Why didn't I notice? There's a marsh, which means there is a route through there.」

There was a marsh to the west of the enemy's base, and even he didn't know where the water there would flow too. Kioka had not seized the Grand Arfatra Mountains long enough to grasp its entire terrain. However— in hindsight, Jean realized a group that might know.

「... The Shinnack Tribe...」

The tribe that lived in the Grand Arfatra mountains for ages. If he knew that following the marsh was a way to scale the mountains, he would have asked them for details. Jean was certain that the enemy reinforcements from the west did just that. After the Shinnack Tribe moved down the mountains after the Northern Territories unrest, someone asked them for details about the terrain.

Someone in the enemy base discovered a shortcut that was only feasible in this unique situation. Jean Arkinex realized this was a critical matter for him.

「— Inform the frontline commander that I will be taking direct command of the army.」

「Huh— Jean, that's...」

「Do it now, Miara.」

The white-haired officer said firmly, his eyes still on the map. Seeing his tense profile, Miara saluted and rushed out of the tent.

Matthew who was charged with the defence of the eastern side received news of his arrival... correction, his return, later than the others.

「...Ikuta...?」

The pudgy youth turned around on the urging of his subordinate, and rubbed his eyes when he saw the figure before him. He was worried he was seeing things because of the desperate situation he was in. But that figure remained there no matter how many times he rubbed his eyes, and that figure even had a nostalgic smile.

「Sorry for being late, Matthew my friend. I overslept.」

Matthew walked over in a daze, and put his trembling hands on the figure's shoulders. He wasn't convinced with just his eyes and ears, and only believed that Ikuta Solork was really there when his palms touched that figure.

He grabbed the shoulders tight and Matthew lowered his head right then.

「... You sure took your time… Two years… Just how long do you want to sleep...」

「Yes...」

「... I was worried that you won't ever come back… that you won't ever wake up… I… I really...!」

Droplets fell onto the ground beneath his face. Matthew finally realized how far into a corner he had been driven, and how tough the past two years had been. Ikuta also realized how cornered his friend had been because of his absence.

「Even a guy like me will reflect on this… I plan to skip naps for the next month to make up for this.」

「That's too insincere of a compensation! Just one month!?」

Matthew yelled amidst his sobs and shook his shoulders wildly. Ikuta accepted all that with a smile and said quietly.

「It's been so long since you last retorted me like that—」

After he stopped shaking Ikuta's shoulders violently, Matthew continued hanging his head and sobbing for a long while. Ikuta waited for him to compose himself and started talking about the battle.

「— We don't have to worry too much about the attack from the west. My unit wreck havoc on our way here, so their forces will be kept in check for now. If I have to guess, they are the Kioka sailors who broke out of our prison camps, right? Exhausted from their journey, they were pushed into the unfamiliar mountains and ravaged by Field Marshal Igsem. With the heavy losses they incurred, they can't spare the effort to launch an attack.」

Ikuta started off with good news, using the defeat of the enemy to encourage him. He then looked to the east.

「The problem is the east— the Kioka soldiers trying to reach the tablelands. They are well equipped, have high morale, and… from the way the cliff collapsed, they must have prepared a large devices to achieve that.」

When he heard that, Matthew lifted his head. His eyes were swollen, but he was recovering to his usual self. The return of Ikuta Solork healed his soul better than any elixir.

「... I heard a deep buzzing sound by my feet, and the ground suddenly gave way. I don't understand what happened. Is this even possible without Blast Cannons?」

「Yes〜 it's possible. The enemy probably dug a deep hole, and braced the tunnel with wooden beams. They then fill the hole with Dynamic Air, light it on fire, and boom! The wooden beams collapse and the ground above will give way… That's probably how the trap is set up.」

「... This means that the enemy already predicted that we will set up base here before the battle started… Damn it!」

Realizing he had fallen for the enemy's trick, Matthew grit his teeth. Ikuta showed a strong smile when he saw Matthew's strong point, his refusal to give up, was the same as always.

「We lost this round, but we can just get it back in the next turn. We are capable of doing so— First, fend off the enemy. The tableland has crumbled, but we still have the advantage of high ground. We can secure our base if we are not attacked from both sides.」

He stopped at that, then suddenly turned to the jade-eyed youth watching from behind:

「And Torway, come closer.」

「Huh? Hmm— that hurts!」

When Torway approached him, Ikuta flicked his forehead with a middle finger. The tense youth suddenly turned teary eyed, and Ikuta leaned closer to grab his cheeks with both hands.

「Your face looks like a hero, and I really hate that. I can tell in one look. You think you have to solve the problem, and shouldering everything by yourself, right?」

「...Ah...」

The youth opened his eyes wide when Ikuta pointed that out… With the burden of his generation on his shoulders, Torway Remeon forgot to seek help from his comrades, and lost himself in his lonely war. Ikuta's words loosened the knots in his heart, allowing Torway to find his old self. Not the leader of gunners, but a kind and gentle youth.

「Since you realized it, then share your responsibilities. Hurry up and remember— that you'll never walk alone.」

These words reminded Torway— when the Knights Corp members first met, he got depressed for not hitting a Kioka soldier with his first shot, and that was how the vermillion-haired girl encouraged him.

Considering things by categorizing those he could and couldn't do, doing his best to complete his assigned task, and approaching his comrades if he needed help. After losing their two pillars, the youth forgot about the principles the members of the old Knights Corp followed unquestionably. But it was all coming back to him now.

「That's right, that's the way— and now, this will be our Knights Corp's war.」

Ikuta declared with a fearless smile. Torway suddenly felt as if the vermillion-haired girl was still standing by his side.

The woman with Haro's face watched the Knights Corp's revival with the return of Ikuta from her tent.

— *It seems that the winds are changing.*

The unexpected reinforcements brought great hope to the Imperial forces on the verge of defeat. The infamous Ikuta Solork and

Honorary Field Marshal Solvenares Igsem. These two extraordinary officers joining the fray was enough to give the troops hope of turning the tide.

— I can't be reckless before the two of them.

And now, Patrenshina had to exercise more caution before taking action. When she saw the root of her problems approaching her, the woman took a deep breath and showed herself before him.

「...Ikuta-san...?」

She faithfully replicated Haro's surprise. From the way she widened her eyes to the trembling in her limbs, she perfectly copied how Haro would react in such a situation. Ikuta smiled at the mimicked action, not seeming to suspect anything.

「Hi, Haro. I'm back. Sorry for being away for so long.」

The moment the youth answered, the woman rushed forth to hold his hands. She kept gripping his left hand missing a finger and his right hand that had all its digits, as if to ascertain if he was really here.

「... That's right...! Two years, it has been two years...!」

The instant she mentioned the time that had passed— tears flowed from the corner of her eyes.

— Huh?

Patrenshina felt a little puzzled— If she wanted to, she could fake tears whenever she wanted. Faking emotions was as easy as breathing to her. However, her tears just now were sincere. It flowed out before she acted out her elation from this reunion.

—… Oh～ Haro is sincerely happy to see this guy come back.

When she realized that, Patrenshina felt great interest in the man before her. But she didn't show it on her face, acting adequately as Haro and observing this person she just met as this persona.

「... This is tough. Since just now, I make people cry whenever I speak.」

「I don't mind shedding a barrel of tears! B-Because, you are back, Ikuta-san...!」

The lines blurred between speaking sincerely and putting on an act, the woman felt distraught by this development. This was the first time Patrenshina felt this way. Ikuta asked her about the bandages he could see beneath her uniform.

「— Did you hurt your shoulder?」

「Oh… Tis but a scratch. I'm still healthy. More importantly, I'm glad that Her Majesty is safe.」

「I believe your bandaging will be fine, it will be bad if your wounds get infected. Don't push yourself and have a good rest. Leave things here to me.」

「I'm glad to hear that, but I can't rest. There are many casualties from the battle just now, now is the time for the medics to support! More importantly— after such a long time, I can finally fight alongside Ikuta-san again!」

She put on a perfect Haro smile, and Ikuta nodded with a wry smile.

「At least leave the direct job to your subordinates. Your shoulder is injured, so you should not exert your arm. Sorry, but this is an order.」

「Since it's an order, I will obey… Understood, I will do just that. But I won't hold back if Ikuta-san gets injured. Receive your treatment obediently if it comes to that.」

This normal idle chat to celebrate their reunion was not sus from beginning to the end.

「Alright, let's head to the main tent.」

With all the members of the Knights Corp gathered, Ikuta and company headed to the war conference venue where Field Marshal Igsem and Sazarf were waiting. Chamille saw he was walking unsteadily, and asked out of concern:

「Solork. Your leg...」

「As you can see, I'm a little lame, but I can walk with a clutch. I can't bounce around like I used to though—」

Ikuta explained as he walked alongside the girl, then grabbed her hand tightly.

「— Chamille, from now on, try to stay near me, alright?」

「—— Erm, yes.」

Chamille was wavering inside when she heard the youth saying that in a firm tone he had never used before… His attitude towards her had changed drastically. She could feel that clearly since he embraced her right after their reunion.

With no regards for the girl's thumping heart, all the officers had gathered in the tent. Ikuta stood before them and said boldly.

「Sorry for the wait, we will now convene the war conference. I plan to assume command of all the forces here— if you don't mind, Brigadier General Sazarf.」

When Sazarf heard that, he raised both arms as if someone was pointing a gun at him, and said with a barely concealable smile.

「... I'm all for it. Anyone who wants me to continue command at this juncture are either fools or the devil.」

「You are the same as always, Brigadier General, I'm glad.」

The youth mirrored his mischievous smile and nodded, then turned his gaze forward.

「With the change in command complete, let's cut to the chase. We will first confirm the situation.

Our 4,000 soldiers are deployed on the wide tablelands. There are enemies on the east and west side, with the west being the 2,000 escaped Kioka sailors, and 10,000 Aldera devotees, some of them armed. To the east are the combined forces of Kioka and the Aldera Holy Army, numbering 3,000. Frankly speaking, we are surrounded, however—」

The officers standing in formation listened seriously to not miss any of Ikuta Solork's brilliant speech after two years.

「— I can say for certain that the escaped prisoners of war and devotees won't launch any serious attacks. The old Air Rifle has limited range, and their fighting spirit isn't strong enough to sustain a melee battle. Our side attacking them preemptively will be a different matter, but we can assume for now that they will be passive and stay on the defensive.」

「Is that true? The enemy is desperate too. There might be the off chance that they will charge us because they have no other choice.」

Matthew unreservedly questioned Ikuta's assumption. Ikuta took it in good stride and added.

「You are right, Matthew, if they have no other choice. However, they do have some hope. They know their allies have surrounded us from the other side, and are adopting the attitude of waiting for help. They know we have the 'Igsem' joker card with us, which will make them even more hesitant to attack.」

「I think your analysis of their psychology is spot on, but what if the Kioka army on the other side gave them instructions to act? From what we know about the Kioka army's modus operandi, the two sides must have some means of communication.」

Torway opined too. Seeing that they nurtured an independent nature over the past two years made the dark-haired youth continue gleefully.

「I'm of the same mind. But even if we assume that to be true, I'm still certain that the enemy to the west won't charge us recklessly. Because I saw the Kioka Naval Rear Admiral Elulufay Tenerexilla amongst them.」

「The opponent that forced us into a tough naval battle at Port Nemong. She's a strong foe in my eyes, but you seem to think differently?」

「She's no easy foe, of course. But that is exactly why Kioka wants to retrieve her safely. Rescuing Elulufay Tenerexilla should be one of Kioka's strategic objectives.」

Ikuta boldly analyzed the enemy. Sazarf crossed his arms with a grunt.

「From Kioka's prisoner exchange strategy so far, it is clear they are adamant with getting her back. Personally, I don't want to return her to Kioka— Half the reason is her threat as an admiral, the other half is my personal grudge. In any case, her presence is a big factor in Kioka's plans this time.」

「I see. Since Kioka wishes to rescue Rear Admiral Elulufay, they can't have her taking risks in this situation. That's how it is.」

「She can still act indirectly, so we still need to be wary of them. More importantly, we can lesson our troops facing the west base on this assumption.」

「Wait, have you forgotten an important factor? The Empress is here.」

Sazarf said. His position had changed from the one being questioned to the person finding any errors, and that made him more energetic.

「Not just the battle here, Her Majesty is a major factor in deciding the war between the three nations. No matter how excellent she might be, you can't compare rescuing a high ranking officer with Her Majesty. Considering that, it wouldn't be strange if Kioka ordered those guys in the west to launch an attack...」

To answer his query, Ikuta spent a few seconds minced his words.

「Hmm… Brigadier General, what kind of victory do you think Kioka is after?」

「Huh? Do you even need to ask… To crush our forces and conquer the Empire or something?」

「That’s right. It doesn’t matter how they do it, Kioka’s goal is to seize the Empire. With that in mind, is laying their hands on Chamille the best option?」

This counter point never occurred to Sazarf, and he looked puzzled. All the officers looked at the girl.

「Kioka also understands that she is ruling the nation through the charm of her personality and leadership. This includes barely maintaining law and order… This is different from the times with the Igsem serving as a sturdy foundation. If we lose Chamille, the Empire will fall into irreversible chaos.」

The Empress nodded quietly. As the monarch, she understood this fact better than anyone else.

「Kioka doesn't want that to happen too. If the Empire splits up, the territories will fail due to mismanagement, diminishing the gains from conquering it. Kioka’s foreign policy will need to be reworked, and they will be stuck in a long war against numerous separate states. We often forget when we are engaged in the battle before us… For all nations, there is more to things than winning a war.

I’m very certain that Kioka has no intentions of harming Chamille here. Not just that, they don’t even want to capture her. Because if she gets captured, her mandate over the Empire will plummet.」

「Then… What will happen now? Will the enemy give up on attacking?」

Matthew asked with a hint of hope. Ikuta closed his eyes and shook his head.

「It’s not that simple. To surmise all that had been said, there is only one possible way this will develop—」

「— We will be fighting continuously for the next few days, and propose a negotiation when the enemy's frustration and fatigue are at their peak.」

In the Kioka eastern basecamp, the officers were holding a war conference too. The staff officers listened to Jean's plan.

「Our demands will be the safe extradition of Rear Admiral Tenerexilla, all members of the Fourth Fleet, and the devotees. In exchange, we will promise not to pursue them. The Imperial forces will be forced to concede— even if we make further demands.」

The white-haired officer stopped here and pondered with his hand on his chin.

「*Mum*
*, as for the specifics of that demand… the elite sniper unit that stopped our pursuit is about one battalion in size. Why don't we 'invite' all of them to Kioka? If those invisible gunners join us, the Kioka Army will be even stronger. They might not be cooperative in the beginning, but their attitude will improve once they understand the good points about about nation.」

Jean casually raised an arrogant and bold demand. If the enemy has outstanding talents, they should be recruited— he was flexible and firm in this regard, something he learned from the Prime Minister who adopted him.

「Enough talk about the best possible outcome— the problem now is how much damage we can deal to the enemy in the next few days. That will directly affect the terms of our negotiation. The more desperate the enemy is, the more forceful we can be.」

The officers gasped as they realized the white-haired officer would be demanding an Empress' ransom from the enemy a few days later.

「That is why I will be commanding the battle directly. Another reason is the unknown unit joining the fray, so the enemy will be pulling out all the stops for their counterattack. We have to shut down any resistance—」

「— In order to have the advantage at the negotiation table, the enemy will be attacking aggressively and push us to the brink. Do not let your guard down for the next few days. That's why we won't be able to defend well if we divert too many troops to suppress the western front.」

Ikuta concluded. Minimizing the waste in manpower was like balancing the troops on a knife's edge— one misstep and the defensive battle would be a wash.

「Let me add that we will lose if we maintain the status quo. If we want to turn the tide, we need to deal a heavy blow to the enemy when they attack.」

「... Can it be done?」

「That's why I'm here, my dear Matthew 」

The youth answered fearlessly with a smile. His confidence was contagious, and the eyes of the other officers were full of life too. Patrenshina watched them from a distance and felt a threat.

— This guy is dangerous.

She had to admit that the arrival of Ikuta Solork raised their morale more than expected. Furthermore, he raised the tactical standard of the Imperial camp greatly, making this Imperial force completely different from yesterday.

— I have to inform the Insomniac about the battle plans on this end. I want to secure a means of communication, however
—

Her activities grew more important with the change in situation. In a battle between two sides that were equally matched, the intel from spies could be the key to victory. Patrenshina had always sent out intel accurately, however...

— I'm sure he is suspecting a spy in their midst. I will be found out if I act recklessly.

She has to avoid any rash actions. Haro's memories made her realize how unpredictable the dark-haired youth could be, so just one mistake and she would be exposed.

— I don't want to lose my head to those dual blades. I have to be extra cautious, even if I have to make detours.

Ikuta wasn't the only one she was wary of. She could hope for the youths to let their guard down, but that wasn't possible with Solvenares Igsem. It would be over if she raised his suspicion.

— We are finally starting an orthodox espionage battle. Fufufufu!

After the war conference ended, Ikuta told his comrades 「I need some time」, then went with the Empress to her personal tent. She was panicking inside, but the girl still pretended to be calm as she brought him back to her quarters. As for Ikuta, he paid no mind to her nervousness and moved inside her tent.

「Phew… let me sit down for a while. Even with my clutch, it's a pain to stand for so long.」

After saying that, the youth sat down on the edge of the Empress' bed. For Chamille, even his arrogant attitude was nostalgic enough to bring her to tears.

「I want to tell you something serious quietly, can you scoot over?」

Ikuta waved the girl over while remaining seated. Chamille thought for a while, then tried to sit down beside him. But the youth shook his head and reached out to her.

「That's too far. Here, come over here.」

「—?」

Ikuta gently shifted the girl's slender body, sitting her between his lap.

「Yes, this is fine.」

「Ughh—!」

Realizing that she was being embraced from behind, the girl's heart thumped. She could feel the youth's warmth through her clothes, and a sweet numbness spread across her body, making it hard for her to think. All her self restraint was wiped away, and her thirst for his touch kept rising—

「S-Solork—」

「— Listen to me, Chamille. We have a spy among us.」

His words were like a bucket of cold water dumping on the girl's dizzy head. All her urges were dramatically extinguished, but it's hard for humans to suddenly change tune. Chamille couldn't shake off her emotions, and her vision turned hazy.

「The spy is a Field Rank Officer at the very least. You have probably sensed this too. If not, we wouldn't be forced into such a predicament.」

「... I-I-I considered that possibility. B-B-But—」

「I understand, searching for the culprit under such circumstances will make everyone doubtful and the whole group might fall apart. So I only plan to tell people we don't need to suspect. Don't tell anyone.」

「I-I-I, I-I get it. B-But, people we don't need to suspect… For example, everyone in the Knights Corp...?」

The girl asked back with a stutter. She expressed her wish in the form of a question, hoping that the members of the Knights Corp would be free from suspicion.

Ikuta turned stiff for a moment, then smiled awkwardly.

「— Of course. Do you think Matthew, Torway or Haro will leak information to the enemy? Chamille, you are really paranoid...」

「I-I'm not! I'm just confirming to be safe!」

「Is that so, good.」

Their conversation ended, and Ikuta tightened his embrace on the girl. Their body clinging close together made Chamille yelped with a 「Kyaa!」

「A-Are there other things we need to discuss in secret...?」

「No, nothing else.」

「T-Then! What's the point in staying like this...!」

「There's no deeper meaning… I just want to hold you tight, that's all.」

「～～～～!」

Chamille struggled silently against the youth's follow up attack. She was defenceless against the blatant show of goodwill towards her.

Watching her every reaction lovingly, the dark-haired youth gently pressed his cheeks against the girl in his arms and thought.

— This must be it, Yatori. The love you want to shower on this child.

He couldn't do this two years ago. Back then, he couldn't care for the girl without mixing any sarcasm or contradiction… He finally did after accepting *her heart.*

— So this is paternal love?

That was how Ikuta felt, and decided very naturally— no matter what happens in the future, he will accept this girl. This was the common wish Ikuta and Yatori both had at the final moments, and had merged into his very being. And so, there wasn't anything that would get in the way of his goal. His sarcastic formal tone and calling her Princess to keep his distance— all these lost their meaning when he decided to love Chamille unconditionally, and disappeared from his demeanour.



「... Hmm. Let’s stay like this for a while.」

Ikuta whispered, brushing the girl’s hair gently, his fingers touching her red ears and teasing her hot earlobes. His sweet stimulus that had no deeper meaning behind it made Chamille’s mind that was at her limit go blank.

— She couldn’t bear it anymore.

Her yearning that she had been suppressing all this while overflowed, and the girl fell into madness. The things she wanted to do to him and the things she wanted him to do flashed across her mind, and a heat surge through her body with each flash.

— Two years. For the past two years, she had been talking to Ikuta who had been silent, seeking a response from the unreactive man. Chamille’s wilted heart craved to get something in return. So, it didn’t matter what form it took— She wanted him to touch her heart and body. She was willing to give up everything for that, even if she has to die on the spot.

「— So-lork—」

She couldn’t believe that lusty voice was hers. A dark, murky and passionate emotion stirred deep within her breasts, and she was too afraid to even name it. Did he know how twisted and terrifying it was when the feelings of admiration, adoration and obsession were boiled and stew continuously? No, he wouldn’t— if he knew, there was no way he would hold her so gently.

Calling it a crush would be blasphemy.

Saying that was love would be a crime that deserved being drawn and quartered.

「——Ugh—」

The moment she thought of that, the girl's wild restrain started working like cogs in a gear. She gripped the hilt of her sabre until her bones creak, using the coldness of the hard steel to suppress the urges stirring in her abdomen— she then thought about her sins. The sins of causing that woman's death, the sin of taking him away from her, and the sin of taking her away from him.

It wasn't clear how aware he was of her feelings— Ikuta ended his embrace gently a short while later.

「... unfortunately, we don't have the time to rest for long, just short breaks in between like this.」

「...... Huff～! Huff～! Huff～!......」

Chamille still needed some time to compose her mind that was on the verge of shattering… But she would reach out for him if she stayed silent. She would wilfully hope for him to accept such actions. At the same time, Chamille couldn't push herself to leave his embrace either— not knowing what to do, the girl chose to converse as a means of escaping.

「... The tone you used with me is different now...」

「Is that so? I don't really remember.」

「It's different. In the past… You are always making things difficult for me.」

「Maybe. Speaking of change, didn't you change too? I took my eyes off you for a while, and you are putting on a tyrant act so thoroughly. It's hard to clean that kind of image once you build it up.」

Once they start talking, she could focus on their conversation, making it easier to restrain herself. Working hard to ignore the warmth on her back, the girl continued:

「... It’s not an act, I’m a real tyrant. What I have done since taking the throne… You already know.」

「You have worked harder than anyone else. That’s all I know.」

Ikuta said without hesitation. Because the youth on her mind treated her so gently, Chamille could feel her body leaning on him naturally. It would be bad if they were alone any longer— when she was aware of that and her breathing became ragged, Ikuta looked towards the tent entrance.

「Alright, let’s go. Matthew will get mad if we take too long.」

「—— Mmm, yes.」

「Raising the troops’ morale is an urgent task. Can you walk with me, Chamille? If we show up together, it will have a better effect in encouraging them.」

Chamille carefully placed her right hand on the left hand Ikuta offered. She almost lost her senses when their hands touched, but she managed to calm her urges somehow.

「...... Ugh...」

Chamille bore with it til the end, and tears welled up in her eyes. She was glad that she restrained herself.

How could she ask for anything more? He could stand, walk, recognize her, and was willing to speak with her— just that was an absolute miracle to her.

「Why don’t we go all out and capture Elulufay Tenerexilla?」

They met up with Matthew outside, and headed to the west side of the base as they discussed future plans. The slightly plump youth had recovered his usual competitive edge.

「Since Kioka values that officer so highly, then we will have the initiative if we capture her first. The enemy to the west are just amateurs and sailors not proficient with land battles, a much easier opponent than the guys to the east.」

「What an aggressive idea. Assuming we do try to catch her, what will you do if you are Rear Admiral Tenerexilla?」

Ikuta asked. Matthew crossed his arms and thought for a while.

「... Run. With no regards for my reputation. I'm already on the run anyway, and my allies will attack the enemy's back too.」

「That's how it is. The group to the west isn't a threat in a fight, but it will be troublesome if they start scrambling around. Including that point, the situation is in a very delicate balance.」

The youth patted the head of Kusu who had poked out of his pouch, then turned to the east.

「And the enemy commander got the better of you and Torway, so our opponent is tough… In fact, I'm expecting him to be a familiar face. I don't want to assume prematurely.」

「I'm curious about the face of our foe too… If your prediction is correct, our meeting with him will be inevitable in a few days.」

「Let's make him show a sour face then. No matter how detestable a person looks, I can accept it if their faces are scowling enough.」

Ikuta joked with a fearless smile. His demeanour that was the same as two years ago put Matthew at ease. He then replied:

「You want our entire force to stay on the defensive… And punish the enemy dearly with a counterattack when their offensive fail.」

「That’s the gist of it. However, our opponent’s attack won’t just be a brute force assault. We can’t make any mistakes in our defences.」

Ikuta narrowed his eyes, starting a tactical battle against the enemy commander he had not met yet.

「With that in mind— What we need to watch out for now is the period between dusk today and dawn tomorrow.」

His prediction was right on point. When the sunset and darkness engulfed the world, the Kioka launched their night attack.

「— It’s a night raid! All units on full alert!」

The Imperial soldiers keeping watch on the eastern cliff reported the situation at the same time. Numerous red lights appeared in the darkness, different from a Luminous Sprite’s Searchlight— Right after that, a large number of arrows rained from above.

「Uwah! Fire...!」 「Fire arrows! Stamp them out!」

The soldiers started putting out the fires as arranged ahead of time by their superiors. Torway watched them from a cabin with a wooden roof and said quietly:

「A night raid with fire arrows… Just as you said, Ik-kun.」

「This base is suitable for a defensive battle, but one of its weak points is the lack of a water source, so we can’t put out a raging fire. So the enemy won’t hesitate to attack with fire. They can easily shoot up with fire arrows from down the slope.」

Ikuta stood beside him with his clutch, then turned his gaze to several spots within the base.

「I have prepared countermeasures too. Most of the supplies have been shifted to the west and separated into small stockpiles. So if one of them is put on fire, it won't spread too much.」

After confirming that his preparation was working as expected, the dark-haired youth suddenly looked up into the night sky.

「And of course, the enemy won't be attacking only from below— but also above.」

Right after saying that, several objects that weren't fire arrows dropped from above— Clang! With the sound of shattering porcelain, the place where the object fell started burning. Torway's face stiffened as he watched the fire a short distance away.

「... It's a 『Flame ball』...!」

「Air troopers are above us. Firefighters, don't miss out on any fire in your watch area! —Torway!」

「Yes! Anti-material Wind Gunners, engage the airborne enemy!」

The Anti-material Air riflemen deployed at various locations raised their barrels on that command. Compressed air was quickly loaded, but there was no sound of explosions after some time. The jade-eyed youth quickly realized the reason.

「... Tch! We can't see the hot air balloon. They might have painted the air sack and basket with dark colours to blend into the night sky.」

「That's within expectations— Luminous battalion, cast Searchlight into the sky!」

The Luminous soldiers aimed their Luminous Sprite's Searchlight into the sky at the same time. Most of the light was engulfed by the

darkness, but a few beams briefly illuminated a corner of the hot air balloon floating in the sky.

「Saw it...! It's over there, focus fire!」

The soldiers aimed at the target marked out by the light beams and squeezed their triggers. Sounds that were closer to Wind Cannons than Wind Guns echoed out repeatedly— But there still wasn't any sound of a hot air balloon exploding.

「... The hot air balloon is flying rather high to prevent any counterattacks. Even with your skills, shooting that Shadow high up in the air with glimpses from the Searchlight will be a matter of luck.」

「Tch...!」

The anxious Torway wanted to join in the sniping attack, but Ikuta grabbed his shoulder and stopped him.

「Don't be hasty, it's fine… If they stay up high out of fear, the accuracy of their 『Flame ball』 will plummet. Without even scoring a hit, the Anti-material Wind Gunners' existence alone can keep them in check.」

He assured Torway that his snipers accomplished their mission even though the target wasn't downed. After soothing Torway's mentality of shouldering the agony alone, Ikuta looked down into the darkness downslope again.

「More importantly, these two waves of attack are just diversions—the main show is about to start. All units, man your stations.」

The trap triggered by the Dynamic Air in the day destroyed a part of the tableland, but there were still many steep cliffs around the east.

Soldiers were deployed to these difficult to infiltrate places, but some soldiers were doubtful about their assignment there.

「... Hey, there's lots of fire in our base. Shouldn't we help?」

A soldier couldn't keep up his guard against the enemy, and kept glancing behind. A female soldier assigned to the same mission shouted loudly at him.

「Idiot, don't lose focus! The Regiment Commander warned us repeatedly to keep watch over our front!」

「That's true, but nothing is happening. The cliff here is intact, there's no point in keeping watch...」

That soldier didn't see any meaning in standing sentry here, and looked down the cliff with a questioning gaze. Nothing abnormal there— the next moment, a large dark lump suddenly appeared before his nose.

「— Uwah—?」

「—? Don't just stand there, get back～!」

The female soldier noticed the abnormality and grabbed her companion's collar and ran away from the cliff's edge. A few seconds after she made this decision— Multiple mysterious objects exploded near the intact cliffs on the eastern tablelands.

「...? That explosion, could it be...!」

The skin numbing sound of the explosion stirred Torway's memory of a naval battle, and his hair stood on ends. Ikuta could feel the power of the explosions, but he was unfazed and shook his head.

「No, that's not Blast Cannons— it's something else.」

The explosion wave kicked up dust and the shrapnels injured the soldiers with cuts. The dark-haired youth ascertained the true identity behind this power after witnessing this scene.

「A weapon specialized in attacking the high ground, known as 『Exploding balls』 — He took out another dangerous thing from the 『box』.」

「*Syool*
— this is a great chance.」

With the explosion above him as the signal, the Kioka soldiers mustered at the bottom of the slope started climbing. The white-haired officer who was observing the attack together with Anarai raised the corners of his lips boldly.

「How decisive. This is a great timing to use Exploding balls, but I didn't expect you to use all the devices you have on hand.」

「No, this is the first time the enemy is seeing this new weapon, using it sporadically would be foolish. Be it now or in the future, this is the moment where Exploding balls will have the greatest impact on the enemy— that's why I chose to go all in.」

The new weapon had an unknown value, which would swiftly diminish after being used in live combat. Jean understood this better than anyone else, and formulated this plan to maximize the effect of this new weapon.

「There are basically three basic tactics when attacking the enemy on high ground. How to send our troops in, how to draw the enemy out, and how to exhaust the enemy's supplies. I'm using the first tactic this time. That attack should have wiped out their troops along the cliff's edge. Which means the enemy has lost the soldiers to stop our climb up the slope.」

Jean declared as he stared at the enemy on the high ground— The 「Exploding balls」 he used this time was basically an unmanned mini hot air balloon. The point was to detonate it near the enemy, so the air sacs were filled with shrapnels to make it more lethal. The Exploding ball detonated very close to the enemy, and should have inflicted a lot of casualties on the enemy.

「I'm not expecting to capture the enemy base with this attack. After causing chaos in the enemy camp, we will look for a good chance to retreat down the slope. For the current Imperial forces, this will be a heavy blow. Heavy enough to crush their morale.」

Jean explained as he imagined the scene of his men rampaging through the tablelands. However— he saw a few Kioka soldiers roll down the slope, which made him open his silver eyes wide.

「—?」

「Hmm— from the looks of things, your plan isn't proceeding smoothly.」

「— Ahh...」

In the enemy base that Jean couldn't see directly. The Kioka troops invaded the tablelands according to his plan, and found the silent corpse of their vanguard before them. They saw the silver flash of blades and severed limbs flying through the air.

「What...!」 「Hiee—」 「U-Uwaahhhh!」

Some of them stood stiffly in place from fear, others lost control of their bladder, and a few charge forth recklessly in reaction to the fear they felt. All of them were cut down by the vermillion haired sword demon who stood in their way.

「Seh!」

Solvenares Igsem was without question the strongest man in melee combat. His rank of Field Marshal pulled him away from the frontlines, but the prowess of his blade had not dulled one bit.

His dual sword techniques were the same as the vermillion-haired girl, but his style gave a very different impression. Yatorishino Igsem's swords were mesmerizing, while Solvenares' sword struck despair in his foes, convincing them that they would die helplessly.

「Ugh, guh—」 「Hieee...!」

Death throes echoed in the dark mountains. As people kept entering the territory guarded by the dual swords, the death throes continued—

「— In a defensive battle of a base on high ground, the commander would naturally stop the enemy from breaking in.」

Ikuta watched his comrades engage the invading soldiers and said to the Empress beside him, although half of it was him talking to himself.

「Because our defences deployed large number of troops to guard the slope, the goal of their Exploding balls is to wipe away these defences. They used this weapon perfectly, and their attack would have succeeded— if I didn't know the details of this weapon.」

Chamille gasped. The last time she witnessed the youth's battle was in the civil war two years ago.

「 Unlike the infantry, it is hard to use the Exploding balls on a terrain without cliffs, since the soldiers above can see the hot air balloon rising from the ground. And now, the collapse of most of the cliffs had severely limited the places where the Exploding balls could be used, so we just need to deploy troops nearby to engage them. And of course, it would be troops specialized in melee combat.」

Aside from Honorary Field Marshal Igsem, Matthew and his Hunter troops were assigned to engage the enemy. With Ikuta Solork prediction as their backing, they could fight to their full potential, substantially increasing the difficulty of taking this base.

「I invited you here to watch the battle, but I don't recommend you to stay long. You should have felt it too— that is a death zone.」

「Hah! Hah! Hah...!」

「Bad news, Brilliance General! There's an Igsem up there—」

「When we infiltrate in, those dual blades blocked our path...!」

The sensation of that terrible battle still simmering, the Kioka who survived by sheer luck quickly reported what he witnessed. Jean listened with a serious face, and his adjutant who had the bloodline from the far east Yaponiku reacted intensely.

「That's impossible— Yatorishino Igsem died in the civil war two years ago.」

Miara muttered with trembling lips. The news of the vermillion-hair girl's demise, the one who killed her brother Nirva Gin, affected her the most. Even now, Miara had still not put her emotions in order, and held complicated feelings towards the name Igsem.

「... They just experience the shock from the Exploding balls, and they engaged our attack without any delay?」

Jean, who would normally pay attention to her feelings, had his attention on something else this time. He furrowed his brow and shook his head.

「Igsem of the blade— is a threat. But that's not the point. There's more to it, Miara. This is the debut of the weapon Exploding balls,

and I have used it in the best way possible. The plan failed despite these two factors— from my experience, there is only one opponent that can create such an illogical situation.」

Jean·Arkinex turned and declared loudly, his eyes dripping with hostility as he glared into the darkness.

「... I can't see you, but I can sense you. You are there, Ikuta Solork!」

「Here, thanks for your hard work.」

A Fire Sprite walked wobbly on the ground, heading to the corner in the base where the stockpile was. Ikuta held it up from behind. The Sprite immediately spew out flames from its 「Fire Hole」, but before its resistance had any effect, the youth swiftly tossed it into a stone fence.

「Using fire arrows as a diversion, then sending in troops after covering their assault with Exploding balls— while this is going on, toss in Fire Sprites with catapults… Not bad, following one tactic with another.」

Ikuta said in a mixture of being impressed and stupefied. Chamille beside him couldn't get tired of staring at his profile.

「Unlike the Imperial forces where the influence of the Church of Aldera is deeply rooted, Kioka could use their Sprites tactically in such a way. In fact, letting such a small enemy that could spew fire wander about is a big threat… However, the Sprites has to make it to the stockpile to light it on fire, so we can just grab them before they make it there.」

To prevent this problem, Ikuta strictly ordered the troops to 「pay attention to Sprites walking by themselves, check which unit they're

from if you see any, and capture it if they're enemy Sprites」. Unlike humans, Sprite prisoners didn't need food, but could be used as bargaining chips.

「Speaking of which… this is annoying. Such a childish, impeccable, immoral and detestable guy. I can only think of one person who matches these descriptions.」

The youth said with a sigh and scratched his head— He had a hunch before reaching here. Even though he didn't believe in destiny, he had to admit that the enemy commander and him were fated to be rivals.

「That's the last of your tricks for tonight, white pretty boy… This is just a taste, don't think it's over yet— There's hell to pay for bullying my comrades.」

Chapter 2: Sloth Versus Insomniac, Round Three

「— Hey, yesterday was sure filled with ups and downs.」

The next morning, in a corner of the base that survived the battle, a soldier spoke quietly. He was having a short break— Imperial soldiers were gathered around eating dry rations and chatting with his comrades.

「We don't even have the time to catch a breather. When the cliffs collapsed, I thought we were done for… But an unexpected reinforcements came, and their commander is that famous Ikuta·Solork-san.」

His tone was very hyped up. For the soldiers who witnessed the stellar performance of the Knights Corp since the Northern Unrest, they would naturally get excited by Ikuta Solork's arrival during their time of need.

「And the main event happened after nightfall. He handled the unpredictable Kioka attack as calmly as sorting out supplies in a warehouse. Can you believe it? The Regimental Commander knew from the start that they would use the Exploding ball thing!」

His excitement was contagious. At this moment, one of the soldiers saw the subject in question strolling alongside the Empress, and all of them looked that way.

「By the way, the two of them… aside from the battles, they are really joined at the hip...」

「Of course. Solork-san is the only person in Her Majesty's harem.」

「He is her official lover? The Regimental Commander sure is smooth～!」

The soldiers looked at the two subjects from afar and discussed facts and speculations. At this moment— a pudgy youth suddenly appeared behind the group that was leaning forward and lost in gossip.

「... I won't ask you to not talk during breaks, but at least pick your topic and watch your volume. I'm serious, you will lose your heads if they hear you.」

The soldiers' shuddered at that, then turned to salute Matthew. Matthew gave them another advice with a sigh.

「Besides— Their relationship isn't as simple as you imagine… Even I don't really understand.」

With that, he left without admonishing the soldiers. Haro, more accurately speaking, the woman with Haro's face, who was accompanying Matthew cast a sideway glance at the soldiers who were still saluting and muttered.

「It's not good to gossip about others… But after Ikuta-san came, the atmosphere on base has improved.」

「That's right… Last night's successful defence played a big part, troop morale has improved drastically. It will be troubling if they got careless, but having high fighting spirit is a good thing.」

Matthew's tone and face had obviously gotten back his old energy. There were also many visible changes. Patrenshina could see the positive influence Ikuta Solork had on the base, and decided to continue observing.

— That's not the only changes, fattie.

She muttered in her heart and surveyed the area. As the morning sun lit up the base, she could see soldiers with crossbows mounted with bayonets standing sentry everywhere.

— There are sentries all over the place. The internal security is completely different from yesterday.

Officially, the sentries were meant to prevent the Kioka from infiltrating, but this was obviously to keep any espionage activities in check. As she expected Ikuta Solork had strong suspicion that there was a spy.

— I will draw suspicion if I leave any traces. It will be difficult to contact Kioka under such conditions.

The surveillance she could spot might not be everything. Their plan might be to distract the spy with the sentries, and use other personnels to find the spy. For example, the sniper unit commanded by Torway Remeon… The snipers hiding all over the base might be watching her through their reticule right now.

— Sigh, but I already established a communication channel.

Patrenshina thought as she focused on her backpack filled with medical supplies.It was a little heavier than usual.

— The timing and placement of the backpack is crucial, but the intel to be sent out is more important.

As they approached Ikuta and the Empress, Patrenshina thought to herself.

— Just like last night, in this situation, he won't discuss the battle plan during the war conference.

When they were closer, she could see him waving her over gently. She waved and smiled in response, not showing the schemes in her mind at all.

— I have to reverse engineer his tactics from the instructions he gave his subordinates, then relay my deductions to the Insomniac.

「Our losses aren't too serious.」

At the same time— In the Kioka basecamp below the cliffs, the commander-in-chief Jean was listening to the previous night's battle reports from his subordinates.

「However… the soldiers are obviously shakened. Because the presence of the Igsem and our plans were seen through by the enemy...」

The officer seemed hesitant to speak, but he was actually relishing in the pointed report. This made Miara standing by at the side said with a frown.

「The ones wavering aren't the men, but you guys. Are you saying Jean's planning are inadequate?」

「No, I'm not saying that… But the results...」

「The enemy commander is unimaginably smart. But are you trying to push all the blame on Jean?」

Miara said impatiently with a firm tone. She had always been irritated by these people who couldn’t set an example, propose alternate plans, and were only good at finding faults with Jean and holding him back.

「Before complaining about your superiors, reflect on your inadequacies! Speaking of which, your deployment of the troops last night—」

「— Silence.」

A sentence cut her off, and silence loomed over the tent.

「I haven’t asked you all for your opinions yet. Can you keep quiet for now.」

Jean snapped out at 「them」. He lumped the officers trying to bring him down and his adjutant who wanted to protect him into the same group, shutting all their words out as just noises.

Miara looked at Jean with shocked eyes at Jean’s words that were so inconsiderate to his companions. However...

「...! ...Yes Sir. My deep apologies, Major General Sir.」

Miara quickly suppressed her feelings and stepped back. Because she could see that Jean was unbelievably focused… After confirming his nemesis was in the enemy camp, the Insomniac Brilliant General was concentrating on how to defeat him. Given how high the standard of his thought process was, it was only natural for him to shut out the noises outside— She was very aware of that.



「—*Yah**
. Ideation complete.」

The white-haired officer spoke again shortly later. No one said a word. Be they friendly or hostile towards Jean Arkinex, all the officers in attendance had no choice but to listen.

「I don't think the enemy will attack in the day— munch!」

Ikuta bit into the jerky as he expressed his views. At the dining table where all Field-Grade officers were gathered, he held a war conference on a whim as they dined.

「Any attacks would come after the evening. Their attack methods are all within our expectations. If we can fend off the next wave of attack, then depending on how much casualty we inflict on the enemy, we will probably head into a negotiation with them.」

Ikuta chewed on a biscuit and washed it down with tea to hydrate himself. The relaxed mood here was in stark contrast with the Kioka camp. Spurred by his easygoing attitude, the officers also shared their thoughts as they dined.

「... Commander-in-Chief, I have a question.」

「Pray tell, Brigadier General Sazarf Sir.」

「Please don't call me Sir!」

He retorted in reflex. Muffled laughter spread in the tent, and Sazarf cleared his throat.

「Cough… Kioka sent out a hot air balloon last night, correct? This mean they can fly over our base and land on the west.」

「Yes, that is possible.」

「In that case… Maybe Elulufay Tenerexilla has already left the west?」

Sazarf asked directly, but Ikuta shook his head immediately.

「Your worry is logical— But she is still there. One factor is the difficulty of the hot air balloon making this round trip, but leaving the feasibility aside, this is a question of her character. That 『Great Mother of White Wings』 sees her crew members as her children, and won't leave them behind to escape by herself.」

「Even if it's a military order from Kioka?」

「Yes, even if it is an order… For her, her children are more important than the military rules, it's the foundation of her personality. There is nothing more certain than that.」

Ikuta concluded, as if he was analyzing the personality of a close friend. He had a deep understanding of the opponent he fought on the battlefield, and met after that.

「Sigh, but there are always exceptions. If she is injured, sick, or suffering from such medical emergencies, her subordinates will forcefully push her onto the hot air balloon. That might be possible, but there is no point in thinking about it. If she leaves the west, that will only lower the morale of the sailors remaining.」

「So the weak bunch will get even weaker… How will that affect the negotiations?」

「It will have some effect, but not serious enough to put them at a great disadvantage. The 『Great Mother of White Wings』 sent to the east will do everything she can to save her men. For the Kioka army, Elulufay Tenerexilla and the fourth fleet are one package, and they can't just save her and abandon the sailors.」

Ikuta used a biscuit to sandwich a dried papaya strip and bite down on it. Sazarf nodded at him with an enlightened face.

「... I understand, that alleviates my worries. Another thing, although this isn't really a pressing problem— is the enemy commander Jean Arkinex?」

The dark-haired youth who was reaching for a third piece of jerky stopped momentarily. He swallowed his food and said quietly:

「I can't be certain since I didn't see him, but… this style is very much like him.」

「... Is that so? That 『Insomniac Brilliant General』 really got us good.」

Sazarf sighed with his arms crossed. At this moment, Chamille who was listening beside Ikuta said:

「... Kioka has no intention of harming me, right? Solork, if you can use this to open a path, then— Hmm!」

She stopped mid sentence. Before she could finish, an index finger gently sealed her lips.

「...Chamille. I would rather surrender immediately then use you as a shield.」

Ikuta said firmly with a gentle smile. When she heard that, the girl fell silent with a blush— the youth ignored her reaction and tapped his left leg.

「And I can't run anyway— Sigh, give me some time to think. Even though the white pretty boy is a tough foe, I'm not a stranger to him. Before the sun sets, we should be able to get some clues from the enemy's movement. I will give the specific instructions after that.」

Ikuta adjourned the meeting here. On the other hand— Patrenshina who was seated diagonally away from him was analyzing everything he had said so far.

— As expected. To prevent any leaks, he will only make the plan public right before its execution.

She judged the youth's avoidance of the specifics to be part of his anti-espionage efforts. She was certain that he definitely had some plan in mind.

—No, even if he did say it, he might change the plan later. Then it will be a battle of patience.

This was what the woman wanted. She specialized in long term infiltration that could take years, and was used to situations that needed patience.

—I have to wait until the final moment, when the intel to be relayed is fixed. When there is no time to amend their plans.

And of course, Patrenshina wasn't naive enough to think just enduring quietly would be enough to secure victory. She made preparations to strike at the same time as she waited for the perfect opportunity to come.

— No, if it's him, maybe the timing he chose to reveal the plan is also a ploy to find the spy?

Patrenshina thought with anticipation. This was the first time she reacted this way.

— I can't tell what he is thinking at all. This is amazing, Haro. This is the first time I met an opponent that gives me such a great sense of achievement if I pulled a plan on him!

Two hours after the war conference cum breakfast ended, around 8 am, the first disturbance to their short peace happened.

「—Ik-kun, there are hot air balloons in the southern skies!」

Torway walked over briskly when he saw the situation. Ikuta who was standing in the center of the base with the Empress nodded gently.

「Yes, I saw them. 1, 2, 3… a total of 30.」

They were outside the range of the anti-material Air Rifles, so Torway could only watch. Ikuta shook his head to soothe the uneasy youth.

「Don't worry, this is within my expectations. The white pretty boy realized the west had lost the will to attack, making the encirclement ineffective. So he is sending some soldiers over.」

「Do we need to increase the defences in the west...?」

Ikuta didn't answer, and asked instead:

「How many people is each hot air balloon carrying? You should be able to see clearly.」

The youth looked over as prompted and used his outstanding sniper eyes to determine the answer.

「... The number varies, but there are five people on each balloon on average.」

「So thirty balloons mean 150 people, most of them are veteran Wind Gunners, and the hot air balloons are filled with new model weapons for the sailors. They are probably filled to their buoyancy limit, but their numbers aren't enough to affect the big picture.」

「... That's true...」

「He is probably planning to send more people over with multiple trips, but the hot air balloon isn't that easy to use. Even if the wind is in their favour, they can only make one more trip before dusk. The west army will just be reinforced by 300 men. Even if we include other factors like the rise in morale from linking up with their allies, you can suppress them with just your unit alone.」

After correctly gauging the threat of the Air Troopers, Ikuta looked away and walked to the left.

「Sending troops to the west is just one move, the main action will still take place in the east.」

Torway and Chamille followed him to the eastern end of the base. The three of them looked down from the cliff side and soon noticed the abnormality in the enemy camp.

「— Speak of the devil.」

As Ikuta's group was looking at the rocky area below, they could see Imperial soldiers tied up by ropes there.

「No stopping, keep moving!」

Kioka soldiers armed with crossbows stood guard around them, forcing them to advance. The Imperial soldiers confused by the situation could only follow their orders.

「Ughh...」「What's going on...」「Damn it, where are they taking us?」

But they didn't receive any explanation. After leading the captives to the spot determined by their officers, the Kioka soldiers took the next step of action.

「Good, stop here! Everyone sit down and don't move! Resist and you'll be shot!」

The Imperial soldiers sat down timidly on that order. The Kioka troops surrounded them with their guards up and continued speaking.

「That's right, just sit tight. If nothing happens, you can return to your camp in the rear. If you need to use the toilet, raise your hand. A soldier of the similar sex will escort you.」

After finishing this one sided explanation, the Kioka soldiers didn't say anything else. The Imperial soldiers seated in the center grew uneasy at the thought of possible mistreatment.

「Could it be— they are using captives as human shields?」

Torway's face cramped at the idea of the worst possibility. Ikuta immediately shook his head.

「No, the white pretty boy shows no quarters to his enemies, but prisoners of war are different. Even without the looming negotiations, he won't abuse them. That will violate Kioka's diplomatic policies.」

After hearing that answer, Torway quietly analyzed the situation.

「Indeed… They provided the captives with food and water, and also hats to avoid heat strokes. That spot isn't a spot our guns can attack easily, so they are treating the captives adequately.」

「That's right, he won't torture the prisoners, but he can make use of them. From the looks of things, those captives are being used as bait.」

Ikuta concluded with a deep voice. Realizing what he meant, Torway's face turned stern.

「... They want to lure us in. Telling us that our comrades are there, and to come down if you want to save them...」

「That's right. There are 15 groups of 40 people, so the prisoners numbered around 600— If we liberate that many people, it will lighten our losses significantly.」

The dark-haired youth said as he scratched the back of his head. In contrast with what he was saying, his tone was leaning more towards wariness than hope.

「Their plan has shifted from invading the tablelands and causing havoc, to drawing us out. Things are going to become problematic.」

The Empress who was watching the same scene beside him thought for a while and then asked:

「... And if we fail to rescue the captives?」

「Then they won't act either, both sides will just stay put until morning— the question is, does our situation permit us to do so?

Our tactical goal is to prepare for the upcoming negotiations, and get as big an advantage over the enemy as possible. Considering this goal, it will be better for us if the enemy launches a direct assault.

The defenders in a defensive base will suffer less losses than the attackers. The more we fight, the more advantage we will get. However— if the enemy does nothing, this situation won't change either.」

Chamille's face became more pained as she listened. She couldn't help blaming herself for her army being pushed to the brink.

「Even if we include the results from last night's battle, our losses are still greater. If we head into a negotiation like this, Kioka will have the initiative. As we are troubling over this, the prisoners are sitting right there before us, leading us to think— if we save these people, won't that turn things around?」

Ikuta explained with exaggerated hand gestures, then suddenly reverted to his stern self and glared at the enemy.

「Baiting isn't just playing on the commander and troops' emotions, but also forcing them into action because of the cost and benefits at stake. This is an example of that.」

「... In a sense, this is more troubling than them using captives as human shields...」

「People who use such brutish methods will make a mistake sooner or later… However, the opponent this time is a well-measured individual with an eye on the big picture. He had braced himself mentally, and considered the entire war as a whole— and the post-war situation too as he searches for the best methods.」

Thinking back on his previous two meetings with the 「Insomniac Brilliant General」, Ikuta grunted.

「To be honest, I'm too lazy to compete with him on the big picture— sigh, let's see how he can create trouble for me, we still have time.」

Having finished observing the enemy, Ikuta and the Empress returned to the command tent together.

「Phew… Haro, I won't ask for luxuries like Cocoa leaves, but do you have something to perk me up?」

「Yes, I will prepare some for you… But are you fine, Ikuta-san? This must be harsh on your body.」

Not missing the fatigue in his voice, the woman with Haro's face asked. The dark-haired youth smiled awkwardly.

「Sigh, I will be lying if I say I'm fine. Going up a mountain after two years in bed is tough. I already made preparations against altitude sickness, but I'm not at 100%.」

「Solork...」

「Don't make that face, Chamille. I just feel a little light-headed.」

Ikuta consoled the blonde girl who was on the verge of tears. Patrenshina looked at them through the corner of her eye, and served tea with practiced movements.

「This is strong tea with herb, I'm not sure if it will suit your taste...
」

「I will get used to it in no time— Hmm, how fragrant.」

Ikuta quickly sips the tea, enjoying the fragrance, then swallows. There was no hesitation in his actions at all, which made it hard for her to judge.

— He drank it without hesitation? I intentionally brew it to taste weird.

The woman served this tea to test his reaction, and the lack of reaction was the most troubling result. It was hard to gauge from this result how suspicious he was of her.

— It will be great if he trusts Haro unconditionally. But he isn't that simple.

The paranoid Patrenshina had already excluded the best outcome from the start. This meant it was impossible for him to hold no suspicion. She had to deduce any hidden meaning behind his reaction.

— He is sure that he won't get poisoned at a time like this. And he is right about that.

For the same reason she admonished her useless subordinate last time, she can't use such a method in such a situation. Before the higher ups calculated the pros and cons of killing or sparing Ikuta Solork, her job was to maintain the status quo and provide intel.

Chamille, who was oblivious to the scheming, noticed noises from outside, and looked over.

「.. Solork, there seem to be a commotion there.」

「I think so too. But this doesn't… feels like the enemy.」

The youth holding a cup of steaming tea tilted his head puzzledly. An officer then entered the tent.

「Your Majesty, Solork-san, pardon my intrusion, I have something to report...」

The officer kneeling before them asked. Chamille granted him permission to speak freely, and he reported hesitantly.

「Under such circumstances, I'm hesitant to say this but...」

The officer finally got on with his report. Patrenshina who was listening from the side sneered in her heart.

— *What do you think about this move?*

「— I'm not a spy!」

A few minutes later, inside a small tent. Ikuta and Chamille were in front of an officer tied securely with ropes and under guard.

「Major Yuguni, please keep it down. If you continue like this, then it will be meaningless to try send the others away.」

「Y-Yes, pardon me… But please let me explain! I have no idea about the charges of being a spy being laid against me! I will never betray Your Majesty! Please clear me of any suspicion...!」

Major Yuguni said agitatedly. Before ascertaining the truth behind his words, Ikuta looked elsewhere to grasp the situation.

「Torway, give me a briefing.」

The youth walked forth from behind Ikuta and explained fluently.

「After Ik-kun's arrival, we have strengthened our internal surveillance. We increased the number of sentries as a show of force, and also deployed sharp eyed snipers at inconspicuous places to watch our base— a double surveillance system.」

Torway glanced at Ikuta, who nodded, then cast his gaze towards Major Yuguni.

「He was caught by the surveillance network. Specifically, a sniper saw a Fire Sprite climb out of the backpack he carried to the eastern cliffs, and tried to head for enemy territory. That soldier immediately apprehended the Fire Sprite, and after some investigation, the Sprite wasn't the partner of an Imperial soldier. It was probably one of the Fire Sprites tossed into our base and evaded capture. Furthermore, a piece of paper twisted into a long strip was hanging from the Sprite's neck. It was the map that details our base's layout.」

「... Hmm.」

「One more thing, the backpack was placed in a spot that would be difficult for the normal sentries to spot. In summary, Major Yuguni might be a spy who is relaying military intel to the enemy… That concludes my report.」

「No! That's not true!」

Right after Torway finished, the suspected spy denied strongly with spit flying from his mouth. Ikuta snorted, then scratched the back of his head.

「So you're saying— Major Yuguni bringing a backpack with an enemy sprite hidden inside to the cliff. This action is the main reason you suspect him of being a spy.」

Torway nodded. Major Yuguni shook his head with tears in his eyes.

「I realized how careless I had been. But I didn't notice a Sprite had sneaked into my backpack…! It was filled with dried fruits for my subordinates. There might be a weight difference, but I can't tell by just carrying it...!」

When he arrived at his destination, he took off his backpack and distributed the dried fruits, and that was when the Sprite crawled out— Major Yuguni explained, emphasizing that he wasn't doing this intentionally. No one replied to him, and the Empress said quietly to Ikuta with a calm attitude.

「.. Solork. We think the spy is a Field-Grade Officer too. Major Yuguni matched that condition.」

「... Indeed. His reaction is like an anxious spy who got caught trying to relay intel. However...」

Ikuta said vaguely. He stopped at the right moment and gestured to Sazarf by the wall who was raising his hand.

「... Allow me to speak for him. Major Yuguni served under me two years ago, and I can vouch for his performance and character. He had never took me lightly despite his longer tenure in the army.」

「B-Brigadier General Sir...!」

「I won't demand him to be cleared of any suspicions… But can we avoid jumping to any conclusion? Since the suspicion stemmed from the Sprite hidden in his backpack, there are several other possibilities. Even if we want to interrogate him, we should do so carefully under a calm environment.」

Sazarf spoke up bravely on this sensitive topic. With Ikuta's return, the pressure of expressing one's view to the Empress had been lowered. This was ideal for Chamille, since that meant their monarch-vassal relationship was mended.

Ikuta accepted that proposal without a second thought. Since the Major had been apprehended, rushing his judgement wouldn't do any good.

「... I order Major Yuguni to be confined under guard. The thorough investigation will probably have to wait after we return to Central. Brigadier General Sazarf, let’s leave things at that for now.」

「Yes, I understand… I can rest easy for now.」

Sazarf sighed in relief. He then led the guards to escort the Major to confine him in a tent.

Patrenshina watched Ikuta’s group exit the tent after settling the matter at hand.

— When things seem to be going according to plan, it is hard to doubt the results.

She didn’t show what she was thinking as she supervised the medics working under her. She played the role of a reliable superior officer as usual while she schemed in her mind.

— Is it the same for you? A spy who avoided the watchful eyes of the sentries gets ambushed by the hidden snipers… That’s exactly what you expected, right? It doesn’t matter whether that really is the spy.

Seeing through the mentality of one’s foe was the methods of a spy. This trap was laid with this logic in mind.

— Refuting this result means refuting yourself. The more highly one rates themselves, the harder it is for them to do so. And this is Ikuta Solork… You are supposed to be the most capable person here. With that in mind, it is easier for you to admit your error than doubting your success.

He was responsible for the group and stood at the top of the crowd. Both these roles came with unique pressure, and the mental weakness would tend to lean in a specific way. She had received

valuable education from her seniors in the Phantom Unit, and could see through and make use of such weaknesses.

— Be as cocky as you want. Think arrogantly that everything is within your grasp. That arrogance will make your field of vision narrow, and twist your perception… And I will play in the shadows cast by the blindspot on your consciousness.

Her instructors were dumbstruck by how fast she mastered this method… But their surprise quickly turned into disgust and fear. Because they realized that her absurd pace compared to her peers stemmed from her mentality of deriving joy from tricking and setting others up.

— Fufufufufu!

「The captives are closer to us now.」

The slightly plump youth who asked Ikuta to visit the eastern edge of the base briefed him on the situation.

「And that unit there is shifting further away from the captives, it is obvious they are trying to lure us in… But, don't you think they are overdoing it?」

「Hmm.」

「I thought about it too. Send two battalions to charge down the slope to the captives, suppressing the enemy with covering fire, cutting the ropes to free as many captives as possible, and retreat when we reach our limits… From the distance and the speed of both units, we might not be able to free all the captives, but we can rescue half of them with minimal losses.」

Matthew’s firm tone made it clear to Ikuta that he wasn’t just speaking offhand, and had put in a lot of thought— and Ikuta responded based on that assumption.

「Since our opponent is the white pretty boy, there must be more obstacles than meets the eyes. He must have set a trap— either on the way there or the return trip, maybe both.」

「Got it. But traps that can be used during day time are limited.」

「Kioka’s gunners can shoot in the day too. They can snipe you in the back during your retreat.」

「That’s true. So we have to do so when it’s about to get dark.」

Ikuta kept pointing out flaws in his plans, but Matthew could answer accordingly, showing how much he had grown. Matthew continued:

「In the evening, the sun shining from the west will cast a shadow at the slope to the east, so night will fall earlier there. We will use this chance to rescue the captives, minimizing our losses in the return trip— is that correct?」

Matthew looked at Ikuta to seek his comment. The youth spread his arms with a smile.

「Perfect. Excellent analysis, my dear Matthew.」

The unexpected compliment surprised Matthew. But he understood something a few seconds later and scrowled.

「... You are making me say everything you already know, right.」

「Instead of me saying it, I’m happier to hear it from you.」

Matthew snorted and averted his face. Ikuta shamelessly put his arm around Matthew's shoulder and muttered with his eyes on the enemy base.

「— But it is time to make a decision.」

The sky was dyed orange after 5 pm in the afternoon, Patrenshina casually watched the soldiers gather in the east from a corner of the base.

— There's finally movement.

She turned naturally and entered her personal tent, which was assigned to all Field-Grade officers, and started digging the ground by her bed. She dug up a Fire Sprite in a fetal position— this Sprite and the one she planted in Major Yuguni's backpack were both taken during last night's battle.

— They seem to be planning to save the captives. With Solvenares Igsem joining their ranks, it isn't strange for them to be confident about fighting below the tablelands.

Patrenshina flattened the ground, removing all traces of digging, placed the Sprite on the table and took out pen and paper. She thought about the soldiers' movement and what she eavesdropped from Matthew's men, then noted down the gist of their upcoming plans.

— Given the relative position here and the captives, the slopes leading there are… The units should be heading down to here, and here.

She could ask the Sprite to memorize the message she wanted to relay, but it was safer to write down information like positions on

paper. She folded the paper that had all the information, then tied it securely to the Sprite with rope.

— They will attack in the evening. The moment when the bottom of the cliff gets dark is the perfect answer. Assuming there are no intel leaks.

Patrenshina thought as she continued moving her hands, covering the Sprite with cloth to cushion its fall. After she was done, she took out her partner Mia, then stuffed the bundled up Fire Sprite into her pouch. Her pouch looked 20% larger, but she could get away with such a trivial matter easily.

— Good, let's go.

Seeing that the preparations were done, Patrenshina left the tent and headed to the cliff on the east of the base.

— I have grasped the positions of the sentries and snipers. There's no need for stealth.

From the intel she had gathered so far, she had mapped out the least risky route. She was confident of her analysis, so she didn't try to avoid people and even pass by the sentries boldly.

— There are some blindspots by the cliffs, but I will draw suspicions if I stop there.

The snipers covered the areas the sentries didn't cover, including the inside. But that meant they wouldn't cover the obvious areas. She was counting on that.

「Good work.」

Patrenshina pretended to inspect the troops and greeted them. The presence of a high ranked officer made the soldiers tense, and they answered with a salute: 「Thank you for your concern, Mdm!」

She locked eyes with the soldiers, and as if she noticed something— she suddenly looked to the left. The soldiers were focusing on her, and followed her gaze on reflex— as a result, their attention fell in the opposite direction of the cliff overlooking the enemy.

— This is it.

Patrenshina seized this chance to open the pouch on the right of her waist and toss the bundled Sprite off the cliff in one motion. The soldiers before her were looking in a different direction, and her body created a blindspot to the other soldiers. The Sprite dropped at the perfect angle left the base without anyone noticing— It landed on a slope a few meters below with a thud.

「—?」

Not seeing anything abnormal in the direction they were led to look in, the soldiers stared at the woman before them confusedly. They didn't seem to suspect anything or hear the noise. Patrenshina concluded that she finished her job splendidly and snickered in her heart.

— *Yes, no one noticed.*

She nodded at the soldier and left the scene— the Sprite below the cliff would soon break out of the cloth and walk to the Kioka base. The intel would then be delivered.

She immersed herself in the small sense of accomplishment, then glanced at the Imperial forces.

— I thought this would be harder, but with that, you guys are finished.

「—Jean, a message from 『her』 in the enemy base.」

As Patrenshina expected, about an hour later, the intel she sent out reached the Kioka army command tent.

「She dropped a Sprite bearing the intel off the cliff. The impact from the fall injured the Sprite a little, but didn't damage the document.」

「The content?」

「Details of the enemy's plans and their deployment in that plan. How many soldiers, from where and their means of attack— there are some speculations, but it's very detailed.」

「Is it intel intentionally leaked by the enemy?」

「The paper has our unique code, please take a look.」

Miara passed the document to her superior. The white-haired officer perused the content and stroked his chin with a heavy expression.

「... Sending out two battalions to rescue their captives at dusk?」

「This is within our expectations. However— knowing the specifics will help us strengthen our defences.」

As a member of 「Shadow」, Miara vouched for her fellow member. But Jean still looked stoic after hearing that, and never relaxed later either.

「... It's time.」

It was almost 6 pm, as the setting sun touched the horizon, night had already fallen below the eastern cliff where the sun couldn't reach.

Matthew's unit was ready and stood in formation at the east of the tablelands.

「Listen up, when you hear the signal, charge down the slope! Head straight for the objective, free the captives and brace for a defensive battle! The enemy will probably flood in quickly, but don't worry! Our comrades on the tablelands have a good view of the situation, and will inform you when it's time to retreat!」

The battle was going to begin, and the pudgy youth confirmed the plan for the final time. The soldiers all looked tense.

「The signal would be the gong from the rear, which means it is time to go! Turn around and sprint back! Don't hesitate if we didn't rescue all the captives— staying there means death. Not just that, the captives might die in the battle! If that happens, then we will even lose the chance to save them through prisoner exchange!」

Matthew cautioned his men. The mission to rescue fellow soldiers was great for morale, but it might cloud their judgement. All that effort might lead to unnecessary losses instead— and to avoid that, their commanders made all the preparations he could think of.

「Understand!? Good— Commence action!」

「「「「「「「Wooooaaahhh!」」」」」」」

On that command, the soldiers charged down the slope. They didn't know what obstacles awaited them, but they had to break through and rescue their comrades— the soldiers filled with fighting spirit suddenly heard a loud noise from behind, which made them doubt their ears.

「...?」 「T-The gong has been sounded?」

The soldiers stopped and turned rowdy. That was only natural, since the signal to retreat was given just one minute after the commencement of the mission. Matthew turned around angrily, just as surprised by this turn of event.

「What the hell— that's too soon! We haven't even made it down the slope!」

「... This is a good chance. Attack!」

While the Imperial soldiers were confused by the sudden retreat order, the Kioka unit on the western front saw their chance at victory and took it.

「Don't be afraid of their shooting! Our back is to the sun, which will shine directly into their eyes, making it hard for them to aim! Use this chance to close in on them!」

The Kioka army made use of the natural lighting during sunset against their enemy. That attacked when the snipers' abilities were handicapped by the sun. This wasn't planned by Elulufay and her sailors. Their reinforcements that arrived via hot air balloon were given orders to spearhead the execution of this plan.

The soldiers charged up the slope on that order, and were immediately greeted by gun shots. However, they were expecting that, and only a small number of them were hit. They think this was thanks to the setting set, but—

「Good— The enemy's shooting lacks impact even from this close! Continue the assault...!」

The commander stopped mid sentence and squatted down with his hands on his thigh. When the soldiers around him saw the blood

flowing out from the gaps of his fingers, they opened their eyes wide.

「C-Commander?」「He got hit in the thigh! Medic!」

The troops wavered because of the sudden change in the situation. To spur his men on, the injured commander endured the pain and yell loudly:

「U-Ughh...! ...Don't waver, it's just a stray bullet! Adjutant, take command in my stead! Leave me and continue the charge!」

Since their commander gave his orders, his men had no choice but to advance. They caught up with the mostly unharmed vanguard, and moved towards the tablelands— And then fell one after another. Soldiers all over the place got hit in the thigh and rolled on the ground moaning.

「T-This is—」「This is too much for stray bullets...!」

「— Three hits. Continue firing.」

The calm voice echoed on top of the mountain. They shot at the Kioka soldiers charging the tablelands from the side, and had not suffered any significant retaliatory fire.

「The enemy vanguard is reaching the top of the tablelands. They will arrive in about 20 seconds.」

「Leave them to our allies. We will grind them down bit by bit from behind, and lure them deep into the tablelands.」

The snipers continued firing according to their plan, aiming below the waist. This was the usual tactic for them now— mass producing hobbled casualty to slow the enemy down.

「They don't seem to be aware of our deployment here. Use this chance to fire off more shots.」

「— The enemy is approaching from the west. Field Marshal Igsem, please engage them.」

「Understood.」

Upon the receipt of Ikuta's instruction, the vermillion-haired general led his troops to the west. Chamille asked troublingly as she watch him go:

「Solork… What's going on here...? You prematurely recalled Matthew's group that was just starting their charge, and immediately sent them and the Field Marshal's unit in the opposite direction to the west… Isn't your objective this time rescuing the captives?」

「Yes, after considering all the factors, the rescue plan has been cancelled.」

The youth said unhesitatingly. He explained to the wide eyed girl.

「One reason is— we are not the only one with the advantage at dusk, the enemy to the west can also use the effect of the setting sun to attack. Our soldier's vision would get obscured if they faced the sun, so there is a big possibility that both sides will act at this same timing.」

Ikuta said as he squinted at the setting sun. Even Matthew, who had grown a lot, couldn't see all these things, but Ikuta didn't miss a single detail.

「And I have a plan for that too. The Kioka army should realize by now that most of our snipers aren't hitting them directly from the front. To avoid the sun affecting their eyes, I deployed Torway's unit

on the northern and southern high grounds. They even intentionally let the leading elements pass, then attack them from both sides to grind down their numbers. This is the only way to draw them in deeper.」

Chamille absorbed the contents with a serious expression. The dark-haired youth gently patted her head and continued:

「The second reason— the mission to rescue the captives in the east has a high risk of the enemy counterattack and inflicting serious casualties on us, and it's the type that can't be changed even if you know it is coming. There's no way the white pretty boy will let this chance go.」

「That's—」

The girl's question was interrupted. Because Matthew, who was recalled with his unit, was running this way with a displeased face.

「Hah! Hah! ...Hey, Ikuta, what the hell was that!? The signal was given too early! We have to turn back and run upslopes like retards, a waste of our energy!」

「Sorry Matthew, but there's meaning to this arrangement, I planned to do this all along. I will explain the reason for keeping you in the dark later— Putting it simply, I want you to assume the attitude of seriously charging in, since you might get seen through if you tried to put on an act.」

Matthew furrowed his brows at that answer. Ikuta kept his eyes on the enemy base and asked Chamille and the unhappy Matthew:

「Oh right, how many of those captives do you think are real?」

At the same time, the captives who saw the whole thing played out from below the tablelands were slack jawed from confusion.

「... What’s happening? I thought they are finally coming, but they turned back midway.」

A man sitting in the middle of the group muttered. He touched the short barrelled Wind Gun on his back, feeling the tough sensation with his fingers.

「Did they notice… our trap...?」

「... It’s not so easy to bait them, huh?」

Jean surveyed the battlefield from a position further to the rear. He conceded that his attempt had failed, and smirked his lips bitterly.

「That’s right. Of the 600 captives brought here— two hundred are my subordinates in disguise. And they’re armed, of course. The plan was for them to directly attack the enemy coming to rescue their comrades… But looks like it failed.」

The white-haired officer sighed. He finally noticed Miara’s worried gaze, and showed her his usual smile.

「I’m not disappointed at all. Including the battle in the jungle, this is the second time I planned to use this scheme, so there’s a good chance they might see through it. And more importantly, that guy is with them.」

Jean glared up the tablelands with hostile eyes. After a slight hesitation, Miara asked something that has been bothering her.

「So… that’s why you ignored 『her』 report?」

The white-haired officer’s shoulders shivered. It was rare seeing him take 5 seconds to answer.

「No— That’s how I want to answer, but I should stop the act. To be honest, I can’t imagine 『her』 outwitting that guy… and can only see the opposite happening.」

He knew how cruel it was to say that, but Jean didn’t mince his words at all. In fact, even an outstanding spy like Patrenshina would only be a hindrance to him on the battlefield. Since he wasn’t confident that her cunning could defeat Ikuta Solork's wisdom, he couldn’t formulate his battleplan around her intel.

「Compared to my trust towards a comrade like 『her』, I’m more wary of our enemy, Ikuta Solork. And the results proved me right—」

Jean said as he unconsciously clenched his fists— and couldn’t help but curse.

「*—Hazgaze**
【Are you kidding me!?】」

— W-What’s going on?

Patrenshina stood stiffly at a corner of the base. Even if you include all the personnels in both camps, the one who was most shocked was definitely her.

— The fattie’s unit returned unscathed, and Field Marshal Igsem’s unit was diverted to the west?

She was still in shock, but her eyes still followed their movements. Patrenshina used the mental fortitude branded into her body to act normally, and racked her brains.

— Wait. This is definitely wrong. Up until just now, the fattie was serious about his preparations. He was all set to begin the operation to rescue the captives.

When she realized it, the situation was moving in a completely different direction. The battle in the east didn't happen, and the troops were diverted to the west instead.

— I can understand if he changed the plan right before the battle commenced. But he delayed his decision, ordering a retreat after they had set off… There's a limit to breaking with conventions! A Commander-in-Chief acting in such a way will definitely cause chaos amongst the ranks!

Ignoring war from a millenia ago, modern wars were not built on the simple order of 「defeating that enemy」. The minimum standard was to let the high ranking officer get a sense of how the battle will play out, or else the war would spin out of control. But Ikuta Solork omitted this relay of information this time. It was easy for her to imagine how confused Matthew Tetzirich's group who had been diverted to another battle must have felt.

— But that man has a reason to go to such lengths… He also trusts his comrades to act adequately even if he goes wild.

The Knights Corp had deep bonds, which should be a shared knowledge between Haro and Patrenshina. However— she was a spy whose profession was betrayal. Her schemes didn't include the firm relationships between people. She was certain that trust was meant to be trampled, but that worked against her this time.

— He invested so much effort and personnel in anti-espionage, and I even offered a scapegoat just to be safe… and yet, he still didn't let

his guard down?

Ikuta's wariness towards traitors contrasted sharply in his trust towards his comrades, which surprised her. Everything he did was to prevent any intel from leaking before the battle started. Not just that, this meant all the intel Patrenshina sent out had been turned into fake news. Not only did he catch the Kioka army off guard, he also seriously damaged her reputation as a spy.

— The Insomniac reacted absurdly fast too. Why did he deploy a unit there? If he made preparations according to my report, he would be more frazzled now. Since that didn't happen, it means...

He didn't trust her report from the very start. That was her conclusion since the Kioka army didn't suffer any major confusion.

— I had been excluded. Ikuta Solork and Jean Arkinex had both excluded me from this battle...

Unable to vent her emotions, she grit her teeth angrily. Ever since Patrenshina entered this line of work, this was the first time someone refuted her abilities as a spy.

— I see. Both of you are ignoring me.

Murderous intent mixed with jealousy and hatred welled up from deep inside her. Allowing the negative emotions to turn in her chest, Patrenshina raised the corners of her trembling lips in a smile.

— This is amazing, Haro. This is the biggest humiliation of my life...!

「... The air feels terrible. Looks like we fell into a trap.」

At the same time, to the west of the tablelands, Greg Ayuzadori was the first to sense something was amiss. He checked on the casualties of his men who had charged forth, then said to the officer who had been sent over as reinforcements.

「Hey, Captain, I won't drag you down with us, so plan your retreat. We have fallen into the enemy's trap, and things will end badly if we continue our advance.」

「W-What are you saying, the battle has just started! Our mission is to draw the enemy's attention until the battle in the east ends—」

Before he could finish, Greg used his swole right arm to pull that Captain's back collar.

「Stop panicking, landlubbers. This is your tuff, right?」

「W-What—」

He pulled him closer and persuaded the slow witted officer.

「You haven't noticed, so let me tell you something. The shooting isn't from the front, but from the north and south sides. The plan to blind them with the setting sun is ineffective from the start— those snipers are more agile than imagined.」

The officer opened his eyes wide in surprise. He clearly had not considered this problem, and that made Greg sigh— Jean Arkinex definitely would have reminded the reinforcements to watch out for snipers. Which meant this officer didn't listen to his orders properly. He was probably the type who took the young Arkinex lightly, the fearsome looking Marine Commander thought.

Unaware of Greg's thinking, that officer shook off his hand and refuted.

「E-Even so, the leading elements didn't suffer serious losses during their advance! They will be infiltrating the enemy base soon, how can we stay back!?」

「The snipers let them through intentionally. Hey, don't you think it's weird? Why our follow up forces are being hit harder than the vanguard?」

Greg glared ahead suspiciously. Lowering the shooting frequency in the beginning to allow the vanguard to approach, then attack the unit behind hard— this doesn't make sense. It's only natural to suspect a trap.

「Prisoners of war are used to draw the enemy down the east side of the tablelands, where they would be hit hard. At the same time, we will attack from the west, forcing the enemy to divert forces this way… That's the plan, correct?」

「Y-Yes, that's right.」

「If things are proceeding as planned, the enemy's movements are clearly wrong. Think about it, if their comrades in the east are in grave danger, are they able to fight in such a way? Conserving their firepower in the beginning, and playing a dangerous game of welcoming our vanguards in?」

Greg was sure that was impossible. Working backwards from this conclusion, things must be quiet on the other end of the tablelands.

「If things are proceeding as planned, then our leading elements will be engaged by their full might. That didn't happen because the Imperial army can spare the effort, and isn't being pushed to the brink. They have enough people to engage us even if we break into their base.」

Halfway through his persuasion, the unnaturally quiet front was suddenly filled with the sound of exploding compressed air and screams. Seeing things were happening just as he feared, Greg grit his teeth.

「See, it's just as I said— the vanguard is in big trouble.」

「Kyaa—!」

The Kioka soldier who got shot in the thigh groaned in pain. With that as a start, the group that broke through into the tablelands with high spirit was hit hard by an Imperial ambush.

「Uwahh—!」 「Don't charge in alone, stay in line with your comrades!」 「Aim for the legs!」

Solvenares Igsem's melee unit took the enemy by surprise— They were surprised by the bold changes made by Ikuta, but it didn't take them long to rush to the west and engage the enemy. Their only assigned tasks had simply been 「engage the invading enemy」. More importantly, the commander, Honorary Field Marshal Igsem, was outstanding as an officer, and could handle any sudden changes easily.

「Matthew battalion, engage the enemy! Fix bayonets! ...Charge!」

「「「「「「Wooaaahhh!」」」」」」

Matthew's unit quickly joined the fray. He had gotten over his initial confusion, and accurately commanded his troops to carry out the dark-haired youth's intent.

「Listen up, don't finish them off! Capture as many of them alive as possible!」

Ikuta watched their fight and said:

「And now— the men we didn't send to rescue the captives in the east have been diverted to reinforce the west that is being assaulted. The white pretty boy will notice soon and attack us, so we can't send all our forces to the west.」

Chamille nodded. She understood the gist of the situation by just listening in.

「Getting attacked from both sides is similar to the situation right before I arrived. However, the enemy isn't coordinated this time— while the west enemy is attacking us as a diversion, the east enemy is waiting for an attack that isn't coming.」

Ikuta grunted boldly. The battle that was expected didn't happen, so the soldiers there were just idling. On the other hand, the Imperial forces were diverted right into a different battleground.

「The battle will start from the west, with the east joining in shortly. And we can use this difference in timing to take out the enemy one at a time.」

「... Ughh...!」

「Torway has grasped my intentions accurately. His sniper unit could have kept the enemy away right from the start, but he chose not to do so, luring the enemy in instead.」

In response to the youth's explanation, Chamille asked a question she had.

「That means… You only revealed this plan to Torway alone?」

「No, I only made some requests— 『Don't just drive the enemy away, and to take as many prisoners as possible』. When he heard my request, Torway probably guessed my intent right then. Which is

to give up on saving the captives in the east, and make up for it with the battle on the west.」

Ikuta believed that the jade-eyed youth would work seamlessly with him even though they parted ways for two years. Their teamwork wasn't as perfect as he and the vermillion-haired girl, but his cooperation with Torway was still on a high level.

「If we don't rescue some captives, we will be at a disadvantage during the negotiations. I didn't forget this condition, I just changed my mindset. Rescuing captives and taking captives are both equally valuable.」

Chamille already sensed why he was so focused on taking the enemy prisoner and said:

「This is correct if we are going to negotiate a prisoner exchange… We can used these captives to extradite our allies...!」

This was a simple change of mindset. Ikuta patted her head as if he was praising a child.

「Leave the command over there to Torway and the others. And now, I need to work on the east again.」

The youth left the battle in the west to his comrade and looked to the bottom of the cliff to the east. To support their allies in the west, a large group of Kioka soldiers had rushed over there.

「Thanks to my reliable comrades, I'm very free now. So don't worry, white pretty boy— I can take you on for the entire night.」

Three hours after the battle started, 9 pm. The Kioka forces on both the western and eastern front withdrew.

「...Jean. The hot air balloon had relayed the casualty numbers suffered by our allies in the west.」

Miara entered the tent and informed her superior officer. Seeing the white-haired officer staring silently at the table, she forced herself to report calmly.

「Six hundred and twenty two dead or missing. It is possible most of them had been taken captive, and not killed. In contrast, there are just 700 injured because the sailors at the rear of the formation decided to withdraw early...」

「*Yah**
.」

Jean said a little too strongly— he cut the report short, as if he had heard enough. With his back to Miara who was a little shaken, he continued with a low voice.

「... Raise the negotiation flag at dawn. Prepare the letters the messengers will need to send.」

「Jean...」

「Sorry Miara, can you leave? I want to think by myself for a while.
」

He rejected her with a cold voice. Given Jean's attitude, Miara couldn't say anything more. She saluted and left with a depressed face. Silence then engulfed the tent.

「Hmm, the battle is intense, but you don't seem to be winning.」

The silence only lasted 5 seconds. Anarai barged into the tent shamelessly and spoke to Jean with his usual tone.

「You don’t have to be so upset. Even if you account for the losses in the past few days, the Empire suffered more losses than you. This means your performance as an officer is adequate.」

「No. That might be true for mediocre officers, but not me.」

He refuted Anarai curtly with his back towards the old sage. The old sage stroked his chin at that.

「Hmm, let me ask you something, Jean. If you are unhappy about something, what do you think is the cause?」

The moment he asked that, Jean looked at the old man with puzzled eyes.

「...? What are you saying, Professor? It’s not like you to ask something so obvious. If the result of a battle I directed is not up to par— then the problem can only lie with my lack of ability.」

He said as if that was incredibly obvious. When Anarai heard that answer, he showed an enlightened face and crossed his arms with a sigh.

「... I see. No wonder your adjutant is having such a tough time.」

Jean didn’t understand why he felt that way. Recognizing once again how deep the gulf between Jean and the people around him was, the old sage said again:

「As a Scientist— or rather, as an older man, I know very well such lectures are useless against the young ones. So I should just leave quietly.」

After making up his mind, Anarai quickly left. When Anarai Khan wanted to convey some information to someone, he wouldn’t just

use words. That was because he was a Scientist that focused on application Science.

「I should invite him to a party soon— That's also the responsibility of a senior. Isn't that right, Bada?」

The next morning. The two armies communicated with messengers through the night, and have completed 80% of the negotiations.

「— The Kioka army's reply added a few demands in the details, but have largely agreed to our terms.」

Sazarf informed the officers gathered in the command tent. The tense Matthew felt a little irritated after hearing that.

「The negotiations are going smoothly… Even though I had made the resolve to raise hell.」

「Neither side wants to drag this on. If this is drawn out, they will run out of food first.」

Ikuta interjected. He chewed on his jerky sandwiched between biscuits and said.

「Wanting to keep the commanders on both sides from meeting is also part of the reason. At least that is what I think.」

Even with the Empress by his side, he didn't hesitate saying his deductions from the negotiated terms.

「... We will exchange Elulufay Tenerexilla and her subordinates, as well as the Kioka soldiers we captured yesterday, to trade for 500 captured Imperials and the 10,000 devotees… right?」

「It's not enough to make up for our losses, but this is far from the worst results. If the situation from a few days ago persisted, they would have squeezed us for far worst terms.」

Ikuta said after sipping his tea, then put down the cup and frowned.

「But— I feel pissed about returning her to Kioka.」

The youth commented about returning the 「Great Mother of White Wings」 back to her home country. She was Kioka's top priority, and the situation couldn't be resolved if they kept her. If they didn't give her back, the battle would start again.

After considering all the factors, Ikuta got up from his seat.

「I will use this chance to meet with her… Even though this might be pointless.」

「— So it really is you, Ikuta Solork.」

The 「Great Mother of White Wings」 and her fearsome-looking vassal showed up under the negotiation flags with an enlightened face.

「I could subtly feel it. The tides changed partway through this battle because you joined the fray, correct?」

「It's my comrades who did all the heavy lifting.」

「You are saying that again, how unbelievably humble. You said the same thing two years ago.」

Elulufay shrugged. She then looked at the clutch in her opponent's right hand.

「That might be so, but you… didn't seem to be as healthy as before. Did you hurt your leg?」

「Yes, I took an arrow to the knee in my last battle.」

「Are you sure about revealing your health condition here? Considering the war in the future, this will become your weakness.」

「You are probably right, but it's fine.」

Ikuta really seemed unconcerned and changed the topic.

「When you return to Kioka, can you visit a man named Anarai Khan?」

「...? That sounds familiar. I remember an old sage who fled from the Empire that goes by that name...?」

「That's him. His personality is a little weird— but I'm still imploring you to do so.」

The youth bowed. This puzzled Elulufay who still didn't understand what he was trying to accomplish.

「... Am I mistaken about something? I can't think of any reason to do that.」

「I can't demand anything of you, this is just a request.」

This answer made the Great Mother sighed in resignation. Ikuta lifted his head, and turned to the fearsome looking Marine Commander.

「And… Mister fearsome-looking face.」

「It's Marine Commander Greg Ayuzadori. You sure have guts to call me that!」

「Commander Ayuzadori. I want to ask, what is Rear Admiral Tenerexilla to you?」

He suddenly tossed out a very personal question. Despite the intense gaze he was getting, Greg answered without any problems.

「... A superior I respect. She doesn't go by the book in many areas, which often troubles me.」

「Hmm.」

Elulufay nodded happily. On the other hand, Ikuta showed a face that was more serious than how he looked during battles, and stared right into Greg's eyes.

「I see... so unlike the others, you are not ensnared by her motherly nature.」

「Huh～?」

「Then, I have a request for you too. When you two return to Kioka, please ask her out on a date immediately.」

The youth said casually, and Greg almost lost his balance when he heard that.

「— Wait. What are you talking about.」

「I mean literally. Ask. Her. Out. On a date.」

Ikuta repeated slowly. Greg's confusion and Ikuta's intensity kept rising by equal measures. Seeing that he wasn't getting it, the youth stamped his feet like a kid throwing a tantrum.

「Damn it, really now— Don't you understand my pain? I have to entrust the job that I should be doing to you!」

Ikuta pressed him as if he was suffering. He looked up at Greg's face that was much taller and continued pushing.

「If you don’t agree… then this negotiation is over. I won’t return her to Kioka!」

「Huh?」

「Promise me, Greg Ayuzadori! That you swear on your honour to escort her out on a date! If you don’t swear on it, then don’t even think about taking another step forward!」

With no regard for Greg’s puzzlement, Ikuta spread his arms like a wall blocking his way. When the thought of 「What the heck, I should just clock him」 flashed across Greg’s mind, Elulufay interjected.

「... You can just agree, Greg.」

「Great Mother?」

「Once we return to Kioka, I will go on a date with you for a day. I don’t understand the goal of this request, but it’s just a trivial matter. No reason to start a fight over this.」

She decided that accepting this request was easier than continuing this bizarre conversation. Elulufay stepped forth and confirmed with Ikuta:

「After returning to Kioka, I should visit Anarai Khan and go on a date with my cute subordinate. Are these all your requests?」

「That’s right, this is the absolute minimum. And last of all. I would like a word with your men.」

Ikuta raised his voice and addressed the sailors behind them, worried about the Great Mother’s safety.

「Letting her spoil you must make you so happy. Fighting for her and dying for her— For people who have lost a place to return to, this must be the greatest salvation— I understand. If possible, I want to do that too.」

Overlapping the image of his dead mother with Elulufay, the youth continued passionately.

「However— try to remember. What kind of face did she show when you guys get injured or killed in this war? Did she send anyone off with a smile?」

His question made all the sailors look at each other. In Ikuta's mind, the sailors overlapped with the soldiers who respected Ikuta as a superior. That's right— this wasn't a completely unrelated issue.

「Since you call her your mother, then you shouldn't let her suffer the pain of losing her children… This war will continue. So will your fleet, and one day, the number of dead will surpass the number of survivors. This is the inevitable fate of all armies.

So— please, think about this. When this inevitable future comes— Can the 『Great Mother of White Wings』 still smile like this again?
」

His words caused a stir that spread through the sailors like a ripple. Hoping that their reaction wouldn't just last for a moment, Ikuta probed them to struggle internally.

「Think about it. What can you do to protect her smile?」

After the three hours negotiations on the terms of the prisoner exchange, they reached an agreement. The Imperial army, Kioka amy and Aldera Holy army started descending the mountains based on their non aggression pact— The battle that started with the Aldera

devotees' Grand Escape ended with the Empire suffering the greater loss.

Chapter 3: Bad Girl

— I still remember how everyone first met.

We were on our way to the second round of the Officer Cadets selection exams, the six of us coincidentally took the same ship. Others might think that this coincidence was the beginning of the 「Knights Corp」.

However, the truth was different. That meeting was a result of many intentional actions. One of which was the Imperial Army— I couldn't say for certain, but Yatori-san and Torway-san were intentionally arranged to be on the same ship by the army. They probably felt that meeting on the ship before the exam would help them foster a better relationship then meeting at a competitive venue… Considering the bad blood between the Igsem faction and Remeon faction back then, it wouldn't be strange for them to go that far.

Next was Her Majesty… No, she was still Her Highness Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik back then. She boarded the ship to interact with Yatori-san and Torway-san who had a bright future ahead of them. Having spent more time with her, I realized that she already had a revolution as her goal— or rather, a hope for destruction.

Third would be my intention. The schemes of Haroma＝Patrenshina, a sleeping agent who infiltrated the place to serve the Kioka army's strategic objective.

My mission requires a lot of patience. Simply put, I have to rise through the ranks of the Imperial army as Haroma Becker, then relay the intel I could get on virtue of my status back to Kioka. This was a typical long term mission, but the goal the high command set for me

was a tall order, compared to my peers. Their condition was — 「Only commence action after reaching Field-Grade Officer rank」.

Just getting to the starting point took me lots of preparatory work. First, I spent two years solidifying my foundation in order to participate in the Officer Cadet Selection Exams. I needed to create the Imperial citizen Haroma Becker, my cover identity.

To earn my qualifications in the medics test, I transferred to my alma mater Mikhailah nursing specialist school and studied for an entire year. My history before my enrollment wasn't entirely fictional either. Haroma Becker was a real girl. This was all handled by an agent who infiltrated ahead of time— They targeted her and her family who didn't submit any death certification after dying of illness, and replaced her entire household with spies. She didn't have five younger brothers, but this was easy to arrange since it was common for farmers to not officially register all their children to avoid taxes.

After firming up the identity of Haroma Becker, I finally participated in the Officer Cadets Selection Exams. I only applied for the first two years but didn't participate, because the preparations to pass the background checks after the first round of exams weren't done yet. And the real records of failing twice will raise my credibility after I make the grade. This felt a little ironic to me.

After all those preparations, I finally boarded that ship and met with everyone.

My first impression back then was that all five of them had unique personalities. First was Yatori-san— I wasn't exaggerating that I felt she was more outstanding than anyone else participating in the Selection Exams. How do you raise such a perfect person? That was unfathomable to me. I only learned a part of the reasons later on.

Next was Matthew-san. His face when he was teased by Yatori-san and Ikuta-san left a deep impression on me, and I felt he was an easygoing person. He was hardworking and proud, the type who others would want to support, even though that wasn't his intention. I built a cordial relationship with him too.

Third was Torway-san. He was excellent, but the greatest difference between him and Yatori-san was his gentle character that didn't suit the military. His selfless personality had always been a flaw, but after harsh training and an internal struggle, he was now working to become a person that could change the way war was fought. I deeply respect his attitude.

The Fourth was the Princess. She might be young, but she was a bright and dignified kid. She was the last person I met, but I have heard about her long ago. Because the person who influenced the Princess' trip to Kioka the most, was also the person who recruited me to be a spy. Because of that, I felt a sort of kinship towards her… and as I spent time with her, this feeling turned into a firm belief—This girl has never been loved.

Finally, the fifth person… That's right, it's Ikuta-san. I didn't have any prior knowledge about him, and was surprised when he hit on me right after we met for the first time. The thing that caught his attention first was very unique— there weren't many men who would compliment a woman he met for the first time by saying how rough her hands were from doing housework. Most would comment on her looks, her dressing or her figure. He wasn't serious about the Selection Exam, not showing any ambition to make it big as a soldier at all. Who was he and why was he there… I only learned the truth a long time later.

What happened next was unexpected. After staying in the cabin for a short while, the ship ran into a seareef, and the six of us were

thrown overboard. When we made it to land after much hardship, we found ourselves in Kioka territory. We got caught in a big crisis on our way to the Selection Exams.

… But I was acting strange.

Could we return to the Empire? Would we live or die? We were facing such a big crisis, but I thoroughly enjoyed the time we worked together to overcome the obstacles in our way.

This was the first time I experienced such a warm relationship, where the entire group hoped for each other's safety, with the goal of surviving as a group. The espionage training I received in Kioka prioritized the concealment of emotions and how to toy with the feeling of others. As for a fellow trainee she could call a comrade… Thinking back, I couldn't answer for certain.

In any case, although the members just got to know each other, the 「Knights Corp」 had incredible teamwork. Yatori-san's leadership, Ikuta-san's wits and humour, Torway-san's kindness… all these played an important part. It would spoil the mood to think about all these as a scheme by someone. I prefer to explain this as our gears just happen to fit together.

No one in this group tried to bully me, deceive me, dump their work on me, or rob things that were precious to me. Everyone was kind and gentle.

Ahh— I wanted to be loved by this group. I didn't want to be detested by them.

So I will be a good girl. I thought that I would always be a good girl.

Why was I staying in the Empire? Why did I have to rise through the ranks in the military?

I probably forgot most of this during that time.

*

「.. Solork.」

This was one of the most hallowed places in the palace— The Grand Courtyard of the Holy White Hall. The high ranking officers prostrating before the throne were all silent, and the Empress asked with trembling lips.

「Is this really fine?」

The way she seeked consent from someone didn't fit her peerless status. Because she knew very well that bestowing the highest honour in this ceremony was worthless in this man's eyes.

「There's nothing fine or not fine with this— we are just going through a fixed process.」

The youth ignored traditional protocol and stood before the Empress, speaking with her intimately as usual. As it wouldn't be surprising for him to skip the entire ceremony, the current situation was already a big compromise from him.

「I will be the same man before and after this ceremony. Don't think too much and just get on with it.」

「... I understand. Well then...」

Chamille resolved herself and took a deep breath. After pausing for a few seconds, she said formally:

「In the name of Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik, The 28th Empress of the Katjvarna Empire, I hereby issue a decree to Imperial soldier Ikuta Solork.

In recognition of your outstanding strategies and flexible imagination, and your great accomplishments at such a young age—from this moment on, I appoint you as the Field Marshal of the Katjvarna Empire. May you perform to the utmost of your abilities and guide our armies to victories.」

「Okay～— I humbly accept this position.」

It wasn't just Matthew, Torway and Sazarf. Ikuta's frivolous answer made all the officers in attendance and the people who knew him smile wryly. When Ikuta received his edict, the Palace's martial officers came to either side of him to switch his rank epaulette. They took five whole minutes to change it out before retreating to the side. Ikuta, who had partially changed to his new uniform, turned to Chamille.

「— See. Nothing changed.」

The youth said with a shrug. The Empress smiled and replied.

「... And also—」

When they heard the lines that weren't part of the ceremony, some of the attendees looked confused. But the two of them continued, as if to show that this was the real main event.

「To honour her loyalty and achievements, I bestow your other half, Yatorishino Igsem, with the same position.」

With that, Chamille placed her hand on the saber by her waist, and Ikuta held the sheath of the short sword in his palm. They closed their eyes with complicated emotions in their hearts. The youth cast his gaze down and said softly with regards to the honour given to her:

「This is what you deserved… Accept this, Yatori.」

「— So it finally turned out this way, huh.」

After the ceremony, the soldiers in attendance left the Holy White Hall, and gathered in a drawing room in a corner of the palace. There wouldn't be a celebration party today, and it would be held on another day. Ikuta might think this was a hassle, but announcing the appointment of the youngest Field Marshal in Empire history had deep political significance.

「Sigh, I can finally shed the load on my shoulder. Since the Northern Unrest, I have been wondering how long I can stay as your superior officer. Fufufu… I will address you as Field Marshal Sir from now on and mercilessly push all the troublesome matters to you.」

Sazarf said with a gloomy smile. The woman beside him interjected.

「Will things really go so smoothly? The relationship between you two won't change so easily just because he outranks you.」

「Don't say something so ominous, Lieutenant Colonel Melza… With a reliable guy at the top, I can take it easy now. Isn't that right?」

「No. Don't even think about relaxing, you lack awareness of your station. The head of the military being the youngest Field Marshal in history doesn't mean you can take it slow. Instead, you have to show your warm support as his elder.」

「How can this be...」

「See, you are slouching again. Pull yourself together, Brigadier General Sazarf.」

After the stern lecture by his female adjutant, Sazarf rounded his shoulders depressedly. Torway watched this scene warmly, and suddenly noticed that his friend had been really quiet.

「Ma-kun, you alright...?」

「... Hmm? Oh, I'm fine… I'm just thinking that after all that we have been through, the two of them got there before me.」

Unlike a certain guy who felt no gratitude towards his appointment, being a Field Marshal was a significant matter to the pudgy youth. That was the final goal the pudgy youth set for himself, and this scene hit him in the feels. However— he noticed that the jade-eyed youth just spoke to him and stopped his thoughts.

「Hey Torway… It has been a long while since you took the initiative to speak to me.」

「Huh… I-Is that so?」

「You aren't aware!? You have been all wound up recently!」

「S-Sorry. I don't mean to… There's been a lot of things on my mind, so I can't spare the attention on conversations...」

「Really now… It's fine since you are back to normal. Apologize to Haro later, she had been worried about you.」

Matthew said in relief. Shortly after that, Torway saw that the subject of his apology wasn't here.

「Oh right— where's Haro-san?」

Footsteps echoed on the smooth marble floor. Patrenshina slipped out of the drawing room without anyone noticing, and thought as she walked along the Palace's corridor.

— *What should I make of the current situation?*

She repeatedly analyzed the current situation. She couldn't afford the time to enjoy idle chatter.

— Kioka successfully rescued Elulufay Tenerexilla. By inciting a large number of Aldera devotees to escape, the distrust towards the Empress had increased by some extent. On the strategic level, this is a resounding success.

She organized her thoughts and turned right at the corner of the passageway, not forgetting to cheerfully greet any bureaucrats she passed by.

— There is only one problem. Ikuta Solork's return to the frontlines. How will that affect my mission?

That was the core of the question. She carefully analyzed the situation she was in.

— As for the problem of spies, I have not drawn any strong suspicion yet. Otherwise, they would have kept me away from the Empress. However— they might be intentionally letting me act freely so they can monitor me in secret.

Patrenshina wasn't overly optimistic or pessimistic, doing her best to accurately gauge the risks— but couldn't come up with an answer. That man was too much of an enigma, so she couldn't arrive at a good conclusion.

— I have to know what he is thinking.

Memories of her humiliation still fresh, Patrenshina thought about the dark-haired youth's face as she stopped. She had arrived at the entrance of the room she was going to.

「Your Majesty, it's me. Is this a good time?」

「—! C-Come in.」

After getting permission, she opened the door and went in. This was one of the few rooms in the vast palace prepared for the Empress to perform her administration duties. Chamille and Ikuta were seated side by side on a large chair big enough for three. They were probably having some alone time after the ceremony.

「Empress Chamille, good day to you. Congratulations on your promotion, Ikuta-san… Oh, should I address you as Field Marshal Sir?」

「Don't tease me, Haro. And don't address me by my rank— You want that to be the first order I give as a Field Marshal?」

「Ahaha, that's just adding unnecessary paperwork. Well then— Ikuta-san, I will be in your care from now on too!」

Patrenshina bowed with a smile. After the small talk about his Field Marshal appointment, she cut to the chase.

「So— Ikuta-san, I want to ask about any progress with Major Yuguni?」

She enquired directly. As the Empress' closest vassal, she had a reason to be concerned about that. Ikuta answered immediately:

「We are just starting the background checks— but we found some tools in his dorm room in the Central base, which can be used to communicate with his agents. The Major denied the allegations, but his suspicion had gotten deeper.」

「I see… you even found things like that in his quarters.」

Patrenshina looked down sadly when she heard that… But that was just an act. After all, she was the one who planted these tools in Major Yuguni's quarters.

「However— even if he is the most suspicious, he might not be the only spy. There is a need to perform an internal investigation. How depressing.」

Ikuta complained with a shrug. Even his casual gesture troubled her.

— Is he trying to keep me in check by saying that? No, am I overthinking it...?

Once she started doubting any implied meaning, there would be no end to it. The woman realized she was too sensitive and cautioned herself.

「Regarding the secret reconnaissance mission done by Matthew, Brigadier General Sazarf and you, I only heard the report after the fact, but I'm certain that mission was obstructed and funneled a certain way right from the start… With Major Yuguni's position, it was possible for him.」

This could be interpreted as Ikuta feeling the spy problem was being solved. After thinking briefly, Patrenshina adjusted her understanding of the situation in a positive direction.

「There's nothing more retarded then letting paranoia spread inside the military. Please don't spread what I said just now. Don't worry about any assassinations— I will take care of it, so please focus on your work.」

「— Okay! I understand!」

She answered energetically in Haro's unique way. The three of them chatted a while more before leaving the room and returned to the passageway. The girl headed to the drawing room as she thought about things further.

— I didn't make any mistakes, and they won't find anything by checking my background. There is still the risk of the agents who came into contact with me during the plan snitching on me. However...

She thought that was impossible. She already has countermeasures set up for this.

— Craig who handled the pilgrimage clothes sales had left the capital. I also inserted other agents into other places… Even if they get caught, I also asked them to say their superior is Major Yuguni. There is little chance of me being suspected.

Patrenshina was extremely cautious. It was her policy to go all out when finding a scapegoat.

— More importantly, the Empress and her vassals are unwilling to consider me a suspect. It should be the same for Ikuta Solork… Way to go, Haro. If not for you, I wouldn't have infiltrated deep into the Imperial Military

.

Patrenshina gave high praises to Haro, who was in charge of their kind side. No matter how outstanding she was as a spy, she couldn't handle this high difficulty infiltration mission alone. It was because of Haro's effort in tolling the field of goodwill that helped the seed of betrayal to grow big and strong.

— Since I have to lay low for a while, why not hand control of my body over to Haro?

Since the situation had gotten tedious, this option flashed across her mind. However, the woman refuted that after thinking over it.

— No, the situation is still fluid. I'm still needed.

But the moment she made that decision— a familiar figure appeared around the corner. She grew wary at the sight of the khaki colored robes of the highest ranking bureaucrat.

「...! Chancellor Trisnai —」

「Oh, Major Becker. On your way back after an audience with Her Majesty?」

Trisnai chatted her up casually. This Fox acted mildly when he wasn't facing a person he was obsessed with, or a target of his scheme. Patrenshina was really glad about that, and carefully observed the villainous minister she had not met for a long time.

— That's right, this person is here too... He had been lying low, but he won't stay silent if he learns about Ikuta Solork.

Be it as Haro or as a spy, she had to keep a close eye on the conflict between Ikuta and Trisnai that revolved around the Empress. Patrenshina thought to herself and adjusted her future plans.

「Oh— I remember there's something I had to do, and need to visit the Empress again.」

「Hmm, let's go together then. I want to greet Her Majesty too.」

Trisnai followed her, as if he just found a suitable guide. Sensing the unique pressure emitted by the Chancellor from behind, Patrenshina made the trip back.

The moment she entered with the unexpected guest, Chamille stood up with a hateful face.

「Fox...!」

「Imperial Chancellor Trisnai Izanma seeks an audience with Your Majesty. Greetings, Empress Chamille.」

He ignored the Empress' murderous looks and greeted her, then turned to the man seated beside her.

「Ikuta Sankrei… Troubling, how very troubling.」

Trisnai shrugged with disgust and contempt. Ikuta looked at him in silence.

「Why bother coming back now? After creating the moment of Her Majesty's awakening, isn't your job done? If you spend the rest of your life as an invalid in the harem, I can turn a blind eye… But you came back to disrupt Her Majesty's mind, do you lack any self awareness?」

「You jerk...!」

Chamille immediately reached her boiling point. To her, seeing the dark-haired youth insulted was a thousand times more unforgivable than mocking her. Ikuta gently restrained Chamille from pouncing at him, and used the clutch in his other hand to stand up.

「It's fine— don't go around picking fights, Trisnai. I know you think I'm annoying. But leaving that aside, I can provide a lot of practical help, correct?」

The youth ignored the insults and said boldly with determination. He didn’t respond to the taunt and said the answer he prepared ahead of time. Part of the reason for his return was to settle things with this fox.

「Letting the outstanding Empress command the army directly— you told me in the past that is your ideal. Chamille is smart, and has probably lived up to your high expectations. But don’t forget, she is more of a governor than a military expert. It’s too reckless for a 16 year old girl with incomplete military education to go toe to toe with war veterans from Kioka.」

「Oh...?」

「The same goes for you too, military matters should be left to professionals. But Field Marshal Igsem who was in that role left the frontlines after the civil war. Who is the leader of the Imperial army after his departure? General Remeon? Or General Shiba?」

The Fox had the same mask-like smile as he stayed silent. That was only natural since none of the generals listed by Ikuta could lead the Imperial Army.

「Neither of them is the leader. The Imperial army lacks a de facto leader, and Chamille had to take the helm. This is what you wanted, but this is obviously far from ideal. The opponent is the Kioka Republic after all. This incident made it clear that Kioka is a powerful enemy just in terms of warfare alone.」

Probably feeling that there was some merit to hearing Ikuta’s analysis out, Trisnai asked:

「So you are saying if it was you— there is a chance of winning against Kioka?」

「Before asking that, think about what you said two years ago in your attempt to recruit me. You already think highly of me, isn't that right?」

Ikuta retorted immediately. He knew very well that his usefulness would be the greatest weapon against Trisnai Izanma in future conflicts.

「Since I accepted my appointment, I will perform my role as Field Marshal properly. Well then, let's go on with the calculation of the pros and cons, which is your forte. The situation is very different from two years ago. Making an enemy out of Kioka, and betting the future of the country on Chamille's future growth is your negligence as a Chancellor. With that in mind, the pros and cons of me surviving… Are there more upsides than downsides?」

Ikuta raised his hands to mimic a scale. The Fox looked at him in silence for a while— and soon reached a conclusion, then spoke with his usual mask-like smile.

「... Very well then. Before you make a fool of yourself, I will observe for now. To some degree, I'm also regretting that I didn't prepare a watchdog worthy of Her Majesty. Since you want to take up this post, I won't mind reevaluating your true worth.」

Deciding to postpone judgement on the youth, Trisnai turned his gaze back to the Empress beside him.

「Most importantly— Your Majesty's bloodline from the Eternal Sprite Tree has truly awakened. Unlike the time when her true self was still slumbering, your uncouth words won't mesmerize Her Majesty anymore. Being overly worried would be rude instead.」

The Fox compromised at this juncture. Chamille felt puzzled, wondering if he was biding his time— but this insane man had his

own sets of values. He was a fanatic who believed in the absolute superiority of the monarch, and couldn't accept any lack of respect towards the Empress.

「Your Majesty— you may use him as a dog or a living doll. An Empress can have a male consort or two if you wish so, all the citizens in this Empire are your subjects, so you have every right to do anything you wish with them.」

The Empress' face darkened bitterly— Ironically, this Fox had complete trust in Chamille, the Empress. The monarch fanatic Trisnai had deep faith in the firm conviction of the girl who killed her father to take the throne, that she would rise to greater height as the Empress. Hence, he wouldn't easily object to her adoration of Ikuta Solork. Because that would infringe on the Empress' absolute authority.

However, he would not hesitate to raise any concern without going overboard. The Fox glared at the youth and gave crude advice.

「However— put more thought into choosing the father of your child. This person isn't someone you should entrust your mystical bloodline with.」

「—What!」

His words made Chamille speechless for a few seconds, before she started shaking with her face flushed. Trisnai respectfully bowed before exiting the room.

Ikuta felt relieved as if a storm had passed, then collapsed onto his seat.

「... Really now. It's been so long since I spoke with that guy, and the huge difference in values is still making my head spin. Hey, Chamille… Hmm? What's wrong, your face is beet red.」

「D-Don’t look at me! Don’t look this way!」

Chamille covered her face with both hands and turned away. Ikuta stood up with his clutch, went around to the back of the girl and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. He maintained this position until she slowly removed her hands.

*

A few days after his appointment as Field Marshal, Ikuta made a rare appearance in the classroom in the Central Base.

「— And so, from today onwards, I, Field Marshal Ikuta Solork, will be your special lecturer. Nice to meet you.」

The Officers Cadets weren’t sure how to react to the youth who greeted them so casually. This was only natural, since the Field Marshal, leader of the Imperial army, was a youth around their age. And he would be teaching them about military tactics, which made things even weirder.

「Relax, as you can see, I’m a young man, so I understand your worries about a guy like me taking on the role of Field Marshal. It will be great if I had just a tiny bit of Field Marshal Igsem’s dignity, but it can’t be helped since I don’t have that.

Alright, since you probably don’t have a good impression of me, I will skip the humble act and get right to the point. Why am I the Field Marshal and standing here as a lecturer? —That’s because i’m better at deploying troops than any one of you, that won’t change even if the scale changes from a section to a division. And I plan to prove that today.」

The classroom was in an uproar. Seeing the fighting spirit in the cadets’ eyes, Ikuta fanned the flames further.

「And so, anyone who wants to challenge me please raise your hand. I will prepare a special prize. If anyone can defeat me, I will make him a Field-Grade officer on the spot.」

Wooaahh～! Cheers erupted in the classroom. After his incitement, this ambitious group of young people who passed the Officer Cadet Selection exams couldn't restrain themselves anymore. The cadets who wanted to challenge him all raised their hands, and Ikuta looked at them nonchalantly.

「Yes, being enthusiastic is good. But I don't have time to face everyone today, so let's pick from the top of the combine rankings. Hmm～ that would be Warrant Officer Kief Laergo, Warrant Officer Maruri Simca—」

He read out the names of the top scorers, and the named cadets stood up gleefully. Ikuta then read out the third name.

「— Warrant Officer Suya Mittokarifu.」

A woman stood up in a corner of the classroom with a clank. She had brown curly hair, freckles, and the corners of her eyes were high, her gaze was filled with unyielding spirit. Her overwhelming fighting spirit silenced the other cadets.

Facing that strong aura that had a hint of murderous intent, Ikuta reeled back a little.

「Uwah— A powerful enemy right from the start.」

＊

As we spent more time together, I got to gradually see all sorts of faces from everyone.

Strong, gentle, beautiful and friendly with a sense of humour, Yatori-san was perfect in my eyes… However, the burdens she had to carry as an Igsem wasn't something the shallow me could imagine. Thinking back, I couldn't help a single bit with the problems she faced through her entire life… Wasn't there something that I could have done? I still thought about that every night.

Torway-san who couldn't change his gentle nature and developed the concept of snipers. He had to take on the responsibilities as next generation leader in the military, and his troubles as a Remeon was at the end of the spectrum from Yatori-san. He would continue to face countless obstacles in his path, and continue to strive on.

The proud and unyielding Matthew-san. I thought in the beginning that he was in the 「Mediocre faction」 of the Knights Corp like me, but I had to retract that. Unlike me, Matthew-san wasn't satisfied with being average. To reach Ikuta-san and Yatori-san's level, he could put in the effort without cutting any corners, he was a great person.

The Princess that I felt closer to since our first meeting was an awkward child like I expected— No, she was more awkward than that. She was a good girl who could empathize with others, but she had the psychological problem of overly hating herself, which twisted her life… I understand, but I couldn't do anything about it. Because I had a similar mental disorder that made me who I was.

And Ikuta-san. He was the only person who became more of an enigma when I spent more time with him.

People often call him lazy or lecherous, but I didn't think this was an accurate description of him.

He always complained about not getting to laze off, but he would save more lives with his actions during a crisis.

He would flirt without restraint at the sight of any woman, but would leave the person he cherished the most in a different place.

Indeed, I experienced both situations. Especially the latter… Even I would get mad. Because Ikuta-san would only flirt with me in the group, but put his attention on the other two girls. No— not just that, I was at the bottom of the totem pole even if we include the men. How infuriating.

In the end, the irreplaceable things in Ikuta-san heart were in a completely different place from his infamous lecherous nature. For example, his mother, Yatori-san, or the Princess. The feelings he held towards them might differ, but the women by his side whom he didn't flirt with were the ones Ikuta-san cherished the most.

… How sly. I understand, but that made it harder for me to hate him, how sly.

I liked the 「Knights Corp」. I was confident that I wouldn't lose to anyone in that aspect.

However— this made me hold expectations. I couldn't help yearning the people I loved to love me too, and for them to accept me for who I was.

And of course, I knew that was impossible. I didn't have the right to be loved. I could only stay with everyone when I'm acting like a good girl. Once my bad girl side gets exposed, everything would be destroyed. However— the moment everything gets destroyed would also be the moment I accomplish my mission.

Repaying trust with the worst betrayal, trampling on their feelings under my shoes… I realized after a few times that even without my position as a spy, Patrenshina and I were such a creature by nature.

Only that person found worth in us. That man who wore his dark blue suit very well… After learning about our true nature, he told us to just stay the same, and showed an unfathomable smile.

「— Patrenshina is probably trying to take revenge for your repeated betrayal, that's why she is so eager to betray others.」

I see, that made sense. That man smiled… he didn't admonish us or showed any disgust. Be it the past or in the future, he was the only person who was happy after witnessing our way of life.

「You can just treat betrayal as a job. I can provide the means. And of course, it won't be work that will weigh on your conscious, but something that will contribute to our society.」

That man was suddenly holding twisted pieces of metal as he spoke, and he fiddled with them before me.

「There's no need to hold back. Use your unique character and contribute to the development of Kioka. If you do so—」

The two metal tubes clinked together. He then said to us with a kind expression.

「— I will praise you two, and both of you will be good girls to me.」

＊

「Both of you have potential, and you are better than you think.」

The sound of compressed air exploding and crossbow bolts echoed through the air, as Ikuta spoke quietly. The two cadets he was speaking to suffered the first crushing defeat in their life, and collapsed onto the ground.

「Warrant Officer Laergo, you are too greedy in your deployment. I know what you are trying to do, but with this level of training, you

should avoid splitting your forces into units smaller than a platoon. As you can see, the soldiers can't coordinate their attacks well, and got taken out separately. You can ask Major Matthew or Lieutenant Colonel Torway to give you pointers on how best to use a platoon.」

Ikuta listed out the things to improve during this short battle, but how much they could absorb was a different matter.

「Warrant Officer Simca, you are greedy about opportunities. I know you have a good judgement on the right opportunity, and paying attention to the details in a battle is a great asset for officers. However, including your misjudgement in baiting, you have to improve on when to pass on seemingly good opportunities. Build up more experience in future mock battles. If this is a real fight, one mistake will wipe out your whole unit.」

The difference in personalities would show up in their command, he thought as he continued his evaluation. Both the pros and cons stem from the cadets' personality, and it would take a lot of effort to optimize.

Ikuta watched over the everchanging battle and added:

「One more thing— after you two dropped out, the former non commissioned officer is still fighting on. You are free to feel vexed about this, but don't be surprised by that. She had experienced live combat under my command. In terms of commanding units smaller than a company, I can vouch for her competency.」

An instructor shouldn't be biased towards anyone, but it was fine if the subject had shown concrete results. The results of the effort she put into the Military Academy was that worthy of praise.

「You have improved further in the past two years. You really are an amazing girl, Suya.」

「— Keep up the volley fire!」

Suya's voice shouting commands echoed in the forest. Aside from her own training platoon, she was also directing the troops of her fellow cadets who had been eliminated from action. She had to holler instructions everywhere.

「The firing over there is too uncoordinated! Even without my command, the timing of your fire has to be more in syncー! The number of shots fired might be the same, but the impact is different! You are performing suppressive fire, the goal is to stop the enemy from lifting their heads! If you have the time to search frantically for the enemy, I want you to fire into the woods instead!」

The battlefield was in the east end of the South Wurth Forest, where Ikuta had a mock battle against Captain Sarihasrag. Suya took part as a member of Ikuta's platoon back then. And now, she was leading her own platoon and standing here as an officer in her own right. That thought made her realize how much time has passed.

「Fire troopers, Luminous soldiers, get ready for melee combat! While we are giving suppressing fire, go around to their flanks and attack! You guys probably can't judge the right moment, so sprint at top speed on my signal!」

Suya skillfully deployed the three different types of units. She was a Luminous soldier, but could make full use of Fire troopers and Wind Gunners as a commander. The experience she had from her time by the dark-haired youth's side, and the knowledge she learned in the Military Academy had nurtured her into a competent front line commander.

「Good— Charge! Spray paint bullets on the face of that annoying Field Marshal!」

「An all out attack at a time like this? As expected of Suya, she did a good job leading an ad hoc group.」

In the center of the unorthodox square formation focused on defence, Ikuta smiled at the growth of his disciple. The two platoons under his command had minimal losses, putting up a sturdy defence against her fierce attacks.

「Well, my square formation is sturdy, so we can defend to the end. However—」

While the youth was saying that expectantly, a presence from the forest behind made him turn back. A group parting the foliage were approaching, and soon stepped out of the woods. They had prominent light tanned skin, and held unique blades that curved forward— made out of wood.

「— So you are joining the fray. Well, I'm the one who told you to join in whenever you like.」

「It's our turn now! Attack!」

Shinnack Tribe Chief Nanak Dar shouted bravely to spur her comrades. Her small unit of twenty Shinnack Tribesmen had also joined this mock exercise. Because of their small numbers, they were given the right to join the fray at any moment, and aid Suya's group.

「It's been a while since you last saw the Shinnack Tribe in action, right!? Ikuta, prepare yourself!」

「—Nanak's unit is joining the fray! They are fighting alongside us!」

When she received news of the Shinnack female warrior's arrival, Suya, who was acquainted with her, directed the troops to support. The sudden pincer attack forced Ikuta's formation out of shape.

「Their defences should be weakening— What should I do? What would he have done?」

Suya who had survived numerous battles didn’t relax just because she had the upper hand. The first thing to consider was how she would turn things around if she was the enemy.

「When facing an encirclement, the orthodox tactic is to break out through the enemy’s weakest point. Will you attack the Luminous soldiers in the left flank? Or the Fire troopers in the right flank? No matter which way you go, I will pursue from behind—」

As Suya prepared countermeasures for her opponent’s possible choices, she saw an unexpected change.

「...? Something is wrong, the relative positions are different from just now!」

Suya stared with her eyes wide open. The units flanking the enemy had been squeezed to the front, passing through the enemy formation and colliding chaotically with the Shinnack unit in the centre. They formed a wall, blocking Suya’s unit from having a clear shot at the enemy.

「This is… the two flanking units had been baited there to seal off our line of fire, and he intentionally let Nanak’s unit break through the center so he could escape in the opposite direction...? He is making use of the fact that she would choose to break through at a single point with her smaller unit...!」

The enemy formation that was seemingly bent out of shape from the pincer attack was actually done intentionally to create this situation. When Suya realized that, her shoulders shuddered— Her opponent was absurdly skillful in his command techniques. He confidently used

a technique that would wipe out his whole unit with just one misstep.

Witnessing Ikuta Solork’s depth of wisdom for the upteenth time causes a strange emotion to well up in the woman’s heart. That unnamed feeling made Suya Mittokarifu clenched her fists so hard that it hurt.

「... I won’t lose! All units, cease fire, start moving! Go around the left side of our allies and pursue the enemy—!」

The battle continued for more than four hours, and ended at dusk with their defeat.

「... Hah～! Hah～! Hah～!...」

「... Huff～! Huff～! Huff～!...」

Suya and Nanak laid sprawled on the ground side by side. The commander shouldn’t act so slovenly, but the soldiers who watched their battle didn’t fault them for it. Even Warrant Officer Laergo and Warrant Officer Simca could empathize with their exhaustion, and tended to their troops on their behalf.

「Good work. Thanks to you two, this is a meaningful mock exercise.」

Ikuta brought two ice cold bottles over to visit the two women who had burnt out. Suya looked grudgingly at the youth whose breathing was relaxed, in stark contrast with her.

「... You aren’t tired at all, huh. I heard you got a bump leg and can’t command in the front lines anymore...」

「The troops will carry me when we are on the move, which is why I’m not too tired. I can fudge through during mock exercises, but it

will be tough for live combat. It’s dangerous if I can’t run by myself during emergencies.」

Ikuta opened the bottle lid and moved it to their mouths as he explained his current situation. He then looked at Suya from an upside down manner, and said with a smile.

「More importantly, you can take on that role for me in the future. Right?」

When she heard that, tears welled up in her eyes. Suya covered her face frantically. She maintained this position and said with trembling lips.

「Don’t get cocky… I wasn’t waiting for you to come back.」

「Yes...」

「I will be fine even if you don’t come back. I won’t feel that I have lost my place, and won’t feel like crying when I’m alone in my room… and I won’t wander around the palace like a fool for a whole day just to catch a glimpse of you or hear you speak.」

Tears flowed down Suya’s cheeks and stained the earth. Her words flowed out just like a broken dam too.

「I already resolved to forget everything, and throw myself into my studies and training until my mind turns blank— and I never thought about showing the results to you. I definitely didn’t think… That if I become better than anyone, then you might come back one day. I didn’t yearn for that at all.」

The youth’s right hand gently touched her moist cheeks. His touch crumbled her defences even further, and Suya whose emotions were in tatters said something hidden deep in her heart.

「— I hate you.」

Ikuta didn’t say anything and kept caressing her face. Cherishing her tenderly, just like how Suya in his arms were, as she put her all into her studies as she waited for his return.

「...... I will allow it just this one time...」

Nanak who was lying beside her mumbled in a voice that only she herself could hear.

「... Yes...」

She woke up on her bed in the morning, and started a new day as usual.

「Good Morning Mia, I want some cold water.」

She brought her Water Sprite partner from the cage to her side, and let Mia add water to the mug by her pillow. She drank the cold water and woke up fresh, and started grooming herself.

— I have to act like a good girl today too? It’s boring if I can’t play pranks〜

Since no one was watching, Patrenshina sighed loudly. When she had washed up and put on her blouse, there was a knock on her door.

「—? Okay〜I’m opening the door.」

It wasn’t strange for people to visit, but she was always wary as a spy. She unlatched the lock and opened the door— and a familiar dark-haired youth with his hand raised appeared before her.

「Hi〜」

「Huh?」

It happened so suddenly that Patrenshina couldn't tell his intention. He probably noticed that she had just gotten up, and raised both hands apologetically.

「Oh, you just woke up? Sorry, I will come back later.」

「Ah— I-It's fine! Erm, please wait five minutes, I will get myself ready!」

She closed the door with that and quickly scanned around her… Things that would be problematic if seen were kept away, and the room was tidy enough that it wouldn't hurt Haro's reputation. Patrenshina judged that it would be fine for him to enter, and opened the door.

「S-Sorry for the wait, please come in...」

「Yes, pardon my intrusion.」

With her permission, the youth took off his shoes and entered. 「Whoa～」 Ikuta came into her quarters that doubles as her living room, and sighed at the sight of the stuff animals everywhere.

「What a lively room. Dolls and stuff animals… amazing, you made so many.」

「Yes— Huh? ーyou can tell they are made by me?」

Patrenshina was a little surprised and asked. Haro was confident in her nimble hands, and took pride in that the dolls she made were as good as those on sale outside.

「I would occasionally see you making plushies in the dorm's drawing room. You would keep them whenever we came, so it isn't obvious. Like that one, you made that shortly after you enlisted, right?」

Ikuta said as he picked up a sloth with long limbs. Patrenshina searched through Haro's memories and answered with a faint smile.

「It's fine to tell you since you already know. That plushie… its design is based on you.」

「Huh? … Indeed, the lazy aura feels right at home for me.」

「The one on the right is Yatori-san, and the one between those two is Her Majesty. The two behind are Matthew-san and Torway-san. Don't they look just like them?」

「Now you mention it, they do match their prominent features. Hmmm… So, which one is you?」

Ikuta looked at the plushies lined up intimately together and asked. However, she shook her head at that question and said.

「I'm… not in there. Ehehe. It's too much of a hassle to make one for myself, so I got lazy.」

「I see, but we will feel lonely without you.」

Ikuta held the plushie with both hands and mimicked voice throwing. Patrenshina turned around with a laugh.

「I will make some tea. How many spoonfuls of sugar? I can afford it, so don't be reserved.」

「Two spoons then, I'm planning to exercise quite a bit today.」

「I see. Where are you going?」

Patrenshina poured the tea from the teapot she prepared everyday into the cups, then added ice cubes made by Mia and the expensive sugar. She used a tray to move the two cups from the kitchen back to

the living room, and saw the youth holding a large bouquet of flowers waiting for him gleefully.

「I'm here to ask you out on a date.」

Ikuta knelt on one knee and proffered her the flowers. Patrenshina stiffly took them, and couldn't help asking.

「... Where did this bouquet come from?」

「It's a secret. It's just like you to retort that first.」

The youth answered with a wry smile and she finally realized what was wrong— *that's right, that was Haro speaking, not me*

「But if it isn't too much trouble, please go on a date with me. We haven't spoken for two years, so spending a vacation day with me occasionally is fine, right? I will do my best to escort you.」

Ikuta invited her in a very orthodox manner with a bouquet of flowers. Patrenshina tried to guess his intentions and quickly looked down.

「I'm happy that you are asking me out. But… Is your leg fine?」

「If I can get a break from time to time, walking won't be a problem. But I'm still a bit lame.」

「Your Field Marshal work...」

「There are priorities in all things.」

Ikuta said unreservedly. His sudden change in attitude made Patrenshina smile without needing to pretend.

「Then… I will take you up on your proposal. We are leaving right now, right?」

「Yes, the carriage is ready. I will drink my tea here, so you can take your time.」

Ikuta sat on the guest chair and entered relaxation mode. His appearance swept all boredom away, filling Patrenshina with tension and excitement.

「Please wait for me. It's been so long since I dressed up, I will get right to it.」

She said as she walked to her closet, certain that this was a sign that he suspected her.

「Yup～! The capital sure is bustling!」

The wobbling carriage reached the capital city, and Patrenshina stretched her limbs energetically. She was very prominent even amongst the people walking on the streets.

「I heard there is an acrobatic competition at the west plaza today, so I want to visit and settle lunch at the stalls there. How does that plan sound?」

「I agree! I love streetside performances! Let's go!」

Patrenshina accepted right away and strode forth. Careful to act just as Haro would, she remembered that Haro had never experienced this before.

「It feels so refreshing to walk in the street with Ikuta-san.」

「Yes, we seldom go out alone, and I think you are always together with the members of the Knights Corp.」

「I feel the most comfortable being together with everyone. So… When I had to be apart from everyone at night, I will feel very lonely.」

She said how Haro really felt. At this moment, she saw from the corner of her eye something that could pique Haro's interest and stopped.

「Oh, that stall has cloth from Tasuku! Ikuta-san, can we take a look? I love their material!」

「Of course. We don't visit the city often, so go pick the cloth you like.」

They stood before the tailor shop and browsed the various bundles of cloth on display.

「It is beautiful and smooth to the touch… This is the first time I see this kind of colour… Ikuta-san?」

Patrenshina called out confusedly. Because Ikuta was staring at each display item like an appraiser from a pawn shop.

「This is fine, that too… Yes, no problem here, the quality of the cloth here is excellent… Sorry for spoiling the mood, but I had an incident with Tasuku cloth in the past. So I can't help checking for fakes whenever I see this material. I know, this is a bad habit.」

Ikuta muttered with a sigh. His expression stirred Haro's memories, and she asked:

「... Was Yatori-san involved in that incident too?」

「— How did you know?」

It was his turn to be surprised. Patrenshina giggled.

「Because I have known you for so long. Ikuta-san… there are many faces you only make when you are thinking about Yatori-san.」

「Really? How troubling… I wasn’t aware until now.」

Ikuta scratched his nose bashfully. His face stimulated her mischievous side, and she got more excited as she spoke.

「Ikuta-san, do you still remember that incident? When everyone went to the Ebodolk Province...」

「you mean our visit to Matthew’s hometown? I remember the huge uproar that happened there.」

「That’s right, we found out that the local Governor was abusing his station. During our investigations, Yatori-san and I disguised ourselves as prostitutes? Her Highness help us to put make up too...」

Patrenshina said nostalgically. Ikuta thought about something and his face turned stiff.

「When you saw us dressed up— Ikuta-san, you remember what you said?」

「......」

「You must have forgotten after so long. Back then— you shouted 『I will pay!』 when you saw me, making Yatori-san and Her Highness mad, and got you chased out of the room… When you left, you quietly said something to Yatori-san.」

Patrenshina didn’t say Ikuta’s line out loud, averting her gaze. She did so to incite his emotions of unease, and dealt the fatal blow.

「Your blatant biasness hurt me so deep～」

「.........」

「What’s wrong, Ikuta-san? You are sweating bullets.」

She turned and asked with her handkerchief in hand. Ikuta who got hit hard said:.

「... This is troubling. I should prostrate before you in apology, but I’m afraid that doing so in public will embarrass you instead...」

He was hit harder than she imagined. Patrenshina smiled happily.

「Fufu! —I’m just kidding.」

She took Ikuta’s hand to make up for that. She could no longer tell whether it was Haro or she who wanted to do this.

「Besides— I can have Ikuta-san to myself just for today.」

「—Ah, that was fun!」

About four hours later, the two of them finished watching the performance at the western plaza, and strolled in the streets dyed the colour of dusk. They were heading towards the parking lot.

「I was looking forward to it since it has been ages since I saw a street performance, but they have so many tricks! As expected of the prosperous capital, the standard of the performers sure is high!」

「Yes, it was worth a watch. I’m glad that you liked it.」

Ikuta smiles at her sincere expression of joy. As he hobbled with his clutch, he raised a suggestion.

「The carriage is parked in that direction, but there is still some time before it comes to fetch us. Why don’t we rest in a quiet spot?」

「You are right. I got too excited, and want to take a breather.」

「Let’s buy a drink too. Storekeep, two juices please.」

The owner of the open air stall took the paper currency and handed two freshly made pineapple juice to Ikuta. One of his hands was holding the clutch, so he used the fingers on his other hand to pinch the two wooden cups. However—

「Ohh—」 「Ahh!」

The cups weren’t suitable to be held this way, and Ikuta’s finger slipped when he handed the beverage to Patrenshina. One of the cups fell off— and she swiftly caught it with her left hand in the nick of time.

「Nice catch! Fufu, I didn’t spill a single drop!」

「Sorry, and thanks. We have been out just half a day, and I already can’t hold things steadily.」

「Let’s find a place to sit down. That place seemed quieter—」

Ikuta pointed somewhere while Patrenshina was looking around. She saw a bench between two buildings over there. So they walked over.

「Yes, that place will do. I will dust it off… Here, I will lend you a shoulder.」

「Thank you. Compared to just walking, sitting and standing up is tougher for me.」

「I thought so. Don’t hesitate to call me for help, I’m the only medic of the Knights Corp after all!」

They chatted as they rested on the bench and sipped on the sweet and sour juice.

「……」 「——」

A strange silence fell over them at that point. Unlike the happy mood earlier, there was tension in their silence.

After staying quiet for a few minutes, it was clear that this wasn't a depressing silence with nothing else to say, but one with deep meaning.

— *It's finally starting.*

Patrenshina realized that both of them felt the same way, and were bracing themselves mentally for the upcoming conversation.

「...Hey, Haro. What are your views on the human mind?」

The first attack came from Ikuta. She answered the vague question with an equally vague answer:

「Heart? What a difficult question. It can't be perceived by the eye and is easily hurt… That's my impression of it.」

She didn't think too deeply about that answer, but Ikuta unexpectedly nodded in agreement.

「Since the mind can be hurt, it can also be hurt badly. It can be crushed, shattered— or break into two.」

Patrenshina jumped in her heart. Ikuta beside her continued:

「My teacher, Professor Anarai, is very interested in such mental abnormalities, and even conducted studies. He used his network of students to collect such mental cases, and noticed a phenomenon in the data they were collecting.」

「... Phenomenon?」

Ikuta stared at his beverage and nodded.

「Correct. And that’s demonic possession.」

The unexpected term made Patrenshina open her eyes wide.

「This refers to a condition where someone becomes completely different. They suspect a demon had possessed them and replaced the mind of that person, thus the term demonic possession.」

Ikuta moistened his lips with juice and continued:

「The patient reports directly attribute the reason as demonic possession, but still searched for the causes from the patient themselves and their heritage. For example, for someone who is always jealous and violates religious teachings, the root cause will be diagnosed as an ancestor trying to harm a priest. They think evil spirits will possess such unclean people… This is just a simple explanation, the concept of evil spirits are more complicated in Aldera Theology.」

「......」

「Anyway, we Scientists are very picky about the research methods. The cases varied in seriousness, but most of them have been jealous of others or violated religious teachings. Using these common elements as the root cause is as good as saying 『People with this disease all drink water, so the root cause of the illness is water』. Before seeing the proof for this, the hypothesis itself is very hollow. As for patient’s ancestors harming priests in secret, this is dubious for most of the cases.

In the first place, making evil spirits, something that can’t be perceived as the root cause is a terrible decision in research. They should look at other possibilities, and only use this method when they had all been investigated thoroughly with no results. Hence—

we view Demonic Possession as a mental illness, and not the misdeeds of evil spirits.」

Ikuta stopped here, which gave Patrenshina a feeling— his next words would touch on the heart of the topic.

「During our research, the concept of 『Multiple Personality Disorder』 was raised.」

Feeling her heart starting to race, she continued listening.

「The hypothesis is that a strong mental blow or daily suppression of emotions might cause the mind to split, literally shattering the mind. Each shard then acts independently, and appears to be a different person to others— This is the theory we invented to explain the truth behind Demonic Possession.」

「......」

「To prove our theory, we investigated the environment of the patients with Demonic Possession before their ailment, and noticed that most of them lived in unique and mentally unsanitary conditions, such as abuse, overwork or neglect. When I read the data on the patients, I thought— people living under such conditions for a prolonged period didn't need the evil spirits to act, they would lose their mind naturally.」

Ikuta said with a sigh, then took another sip of juice. He didn't need to say all that, Patrenshina knew that was exactly the case. Because that was her experience.

「However, I have my doubts on using 『Multiple Personality Disorder』 to replace 『Demonic Possession』. First of all, is 『Multiple Personality Disorder』 really an illness?」

Ikuta was talking about something really complicated. Patrenshina listened carefully.

「I think being mentally healthy in the eyes of society— such as being kind, is a learned behaviour. More accurately speaking, for someone to know righteousness, an environment where being righteous is meaningful has to exist. Let me put it another way, in an environment where being kind will kill you, you won't be able to nurture kindness. For example, if there are three breads and ten starving mouths, sharing it with everyone will lead to your death, so you have to steal someone's bread to survive— this isn't something education or ethics can interfere with, life will sort things out directly.」

At this moment, Kusu poked his head out of the pouch. Ikuta caressed its cheek gently with his fingertips.

「There are exceptions like Sprites, which we won't touch on for now. Back on topic— let's say there's a girl who developed mentally according to her environment. A warm and gentle environment made her a good girl, while a harsh environment made her a child with a twisted nature… This is too simple of an assumption. The development of the human mind isn't that simple.」

「... Indeed.」

「But for convenience sake, we need to allow some simplification… So, what kind of environment will cause a split in personality? This includes some speculations— but it should be a drastic change to that person's environment, a change so drastic that her personality couldn't cope. For example, what will happen if you left a girl living a normal life left into a world of violence? No one had hit her the day before, so it will be hard for her to adjust. Just like clay molded into

the shape of an apple can't suddenly changed into the shape of a grape.」

What happened was just like he described, she thought. This was how she was created.

「Surrounded by threats, there wasn't any time to slowly adjust, but she still wants to survive— I think the subconscious will make a decision to create a different and independent persona.」

「......」

「If that was the case, this isn't an illness, but a survival strategy. No matter how society thinks about it, it doesn't change the fact she had to change this way to survive. A condition that saved her instead of endangering her— I can't call that an illness. It shouldn't be considered an ailment.」

He stopped there. Patrenshina slowly turned to the youth.

「... This is an interesting topic. But why are you telling me all this?」

「I never thought Major Yuguni is a spy from the very start.」

Ikuta was seemingly ignoring her question, but was actually answering right to the point. But saying this didn't bring any joy to the youth. He continued with a bitter face.

「I can't imagine someone competent enough to infiltrate so deep into the army will make a mistake in such a situation because of anxiety and carelessness. That is a fake setup designed to pacify me alone. *The traitor has been caught with your plan, so you can relax now—* the intention was very obvious.」

In her heart, Patrenshina's expression cramped. *You are the only one who can see through that—*
She thought.

「The moment we met again, I felt something was a little wrong. The person before me was slightly different from the person I knew— And of course, this minute difference can be explained as the result of two years passing.」

「.........」

「However, I can't ignore the sense of wrongness. No, I can't do it. Because— I feel guilty towards you.」

「... Guilty?」

Not expecting those words, Patrenshina parroted him. Ikuta couldn't look her in the eye and said with a heavy tone.

「I didn't face you properly.」

At this moment, she felt a sharp pain in her chest. This pain was how Haro felt when she heard that.

「Yatori and I faced each other sincerely till the end. I shamelessly interjected into Torway's struggles, and have always watched Matthew's efforts from the very start. And now, I'm trying to accept Chamille's dark side in my own way… And compared to them, my understanding towards Haro— towards you are too shallow.」

「...... That's...」

「You left a great first impression on me. You are calm, gentle, and soothes the mood just with your presence. You have always been an indispensable part of the Knights Corp, and I'm really glad that you are still smiling like always… That must be true during my absence for

the past two years. The Princess, Matthew and Torway— It's all thanks to your mediation that they can maintain their relationship.」

Torn between feelings of gratitude and self-loath, Ikuta bit his lips and hung his head sullenly.

「Because of the serious and complicated problems our comrades have, I can feel at ease because you are here. I was sure that you didn't have any issues— No, I was hoping that to be true. Yatori's circumstances, Torway's circumstances, Matthew's circumstances, Chamille's circumstances, my subordinate's circumstances… Back then, my mind was thinking about all this and couldn't handle more… And I foolishly neglected to seriously think about your circumstances.」

The wooden cup in Ikuta's hand was creaking from his grip. However, Patrenshina smiled brightly at the youth who was blaming himself.

「— It's fine. Like Ikuta-san said, I don't have any serious issues, that's why I'm so optimistic and cheery. If my attitude can help everyone— then please don't hold back, you can come to me in the future too. That will make me happier than not being of any use.」

She rejected his concern with gentle words, telling him that his worries were pointless. However, Ikuta wasn't stupid enough to take her literally. His eyes still downcast, he finished his juice and set the cup aside.

「... Hey, Haro. To be honest, I want to trust my comrades at all times.」

「......」

「But the word trust is delicate, and its value might plummet depending on the way it is used. For example— a foolish man who

never pays attention to another’s deepest thoughts, and even avoids that person. If that man knew that and still claims to “trust” that person, that isn’t trust, but just him giving up on thinking.」

This is something I won’t do to my comrades
, Ikuta added. A feeling that surpassed pain swirling in her chest made Patrenshina gasp for breath.

「... Back to the earlier topic, Multiple Personality Disorder— people with this disorder have several common symptoms. One of it is the difference in demeanour when their persona changes. Like a woman speaking a language different from the original persona; A man who hates exercising suddenly running 10km daily. But I don’t think it’s the change in persona that causes this change, but the opposite— it’s the change in demeanour that switches the persona. This is a sort of trigger that makes the subjects believe they are a different independent persona from the original— and that is the difference between simple acting and Multiple Personality Disorder.

Acting is a performance for others, but the actions by someone with Multiple Personality Disorder is done primary for themselves. They have to firmly believe that they have changed into a completely different person. This isn’t something that anyone can achieve through hard work— I think this is a sort of talent.」

「......」

「Switching some features from one extreme to another is a common activation trigger. For example, a quiet person becomes talkative, someone who dislikes alcohol starts to drink like a whale, etc. Or maybe— in extreme cases, a right handed person becoming left handed.」

The youth cast his gaze on the hands of the woman sitting beside him.

「From what I know, Haro, you are right handed. But when my beverage was falling, you caught it with your left hand… Even though your right hand is closer to the drinks.」

「……」

「Because you are left handed right now. Even if you pretend your dominant hand is your right hand, you will still reach the other hand out on reflex. That is probably your trigger condition, so you can't conceal it with acting— No, this is the only thing you can't hide completely. Your dominant hand being different from Haro is proof that you are a different persona.」

What amazing observation skills. Patrenshina thought as she tried to refute him.

「That's too whimsical of an evidence, Ikuta-san. I'm a medic, you know? Cutting and mending wounds are my specialty, so the fingers on both of my hands are trained to be equally nimble. I'm very close to being ambidextrous. It's not surprising for me to reach my left hand out on reflex.」

Ikuta didn't refute her excuse. At this moment, she realized— the youth was capable of refuting, but saw no point in doing so. He wasn't just using the vague proof of her dominant hand to question her identity. He still had a stronger hand to play.

「Right now, I can't say I believe you… However, I have still been observing you, and there are things that made me convinced about that.」

As if to show that he wouldn't back down, Ikuta said with a firm conviction in his eyes.

「Haro and us spent a lot of time together, and fought for survival on the battlefield alongside everyone. During that time, there isn't any falsehood in her feelings. There's no need to list examples, the time the Knights Corp spent together is the best evidence… I'm still not sure about the true identity of that malice in your heart. However, the kindness in your heart really does exist.

That's how I arrived at the seemingly illogical conclusion of different personas. The kindness and malice in your heart should both exist at the same time, and would usually be mixed together to form a grey area. However, the dark and white sides in your mind are separate. Base on all the facts on hand— I won't be convinced of any other answers.」

Patrenshina gritted her teeth in her heart— She couldn't admit it. She would never accept that the youth arrived at the truth through such a thought process.

Because the kindness in Haro truly exists, so he searched for the possibility that her malice existed independently at the same time? This subjective way of thinking was too far off the mark, and violated the rules of objectively reasoning of the Science he worship so much.

「You are being too stubborn, Ikuta-san. Multiple Personality Disorder, left dominant hand and all that— there's no need to think too hard about all this. There isn't any malice in my heart, that's the conclusion from the start.」

She had to admit that if there was something that could defeat her as a spy, it would be cold rational thinking. If he didn't display such merciless thoughts, she would never concede.

「... You want to end it, right?」

Ikuta realized what she was saying, realized that was the final line that she wouldn't budge from.

「Then let me end it for you.」

So he started. The youth grit his teeth. Coldly analyzing the evidence to expose the wrongdoings of his comrades weighed heavily on him.

「... During the defensive battles of the tableland, I already predicted that the enemy might throw Sprites over to commit arson, and at the same time— I predicted that the Sprites might be a means for the enemy to communicate with the traitor.」

When he said that, Patrenshina felt a chill run down her spine.

「It would be hard to send intel to Kioka from our base. Messenger pigeon wasn't possible, a letter tied to an arrow might not be noticed by the Kioka army, and light signals would take too long. In that case, the most practical method would be via Sprites. By dropping the Sprite bearing the message down the cliff, it would walk right towards the Kioka soldiers.」

「......」

「However, the message couldn't be sent by their partner. Sprites are indispensable partners for a soldier, and this would be a one way trip. But the Sprites from other Imperial soldiers wouldn't do as they say— so my attention was on the Fire Sprites thrown over by the Kioka army. Because they would surely bring the intel back to the Kioka camp.」

Her sense of impending doom made Patrenshina breathe out as if she was out of breath.

「With that speculation in mind, I made an arrangement— When the battle started, I also released tens of Kioka Fire Sprite we had captured earlier.」

When humans were forced to the brink, they would naturally show a smile.

「Back then, didn't you think there were plenty of Sprites loitering around your feet? Half of them were thrown in by the Kioka army, the other half were released on my orders. And of course, I made arrangements to make them indistinguishable from each other— since the Sprites thrown in by Kioka were already disguised as Imperial Sprites. It would be hard to differentiate them. And I told those Sprites, in exchange for the safety of their masters, they were to answer when questioned, that they were Kioka Sprites in the middle of an operation.」

A cold, cruel and utterly merciless trap. She thought to herself— This was it. He would need a blade that sharp to destroy her.

「Do you get it? I snuck in some double agents into the Sprites that the Kioka threw over. I then periodically released them, taking note to differentiate the double agents from the new Sprites… what would happen then?

The answer is simple. Compared to the Kioka spy Sprites that are locked up once caught, the double agent Sprites have a higher chance of being noticed. The Sprites falling from the sky are really obvious, and would get caught in no time, so during the later stages, more than 80% of the Sprites are double agents.」

Everything he said were tricks she was proud of. But that was just her delusions. She finally realized why Jean Arkinex refused to take her reports into his plans.

「We predicted that the spy would retrieve two Sprites. One of them was sent to the Kioka camp to relay intel, and luckily, it was a real Kioka Sprite… But, what about the other?」

Just like how Ikuta never properly faced Haro's dark side, they never delved into how strong the youth actually was. Not just the depths, they didn't even know the breadth of his knowledge.

「That's right, it's the Sprite found in Major Yuguni's backpack. On the surface, we declare that as an enemy Sprite, but it has secretly reported the truth to me.」

He would conclude his answer soon. The youth used the most brilliant method to announce it to them.

「Hence… I already know who caught that Sprite and hid it in Major Yuguni's backpack.」

Ikuta concluded and cast his eyes down again. He felt absolutely disgusted with the way he was eviscerating a comrade.

「— Splendid.」

Hearing an unfamiliar voice, Ikuta looked up on reflex and found that his deductions were on point. That woman's smile, tone, and presence— didn't belong to the Haro he knew.

「This is a total defeat, it's almost driving me mad. What a joke. I thought things are getting dicey, but to think this is already checkmate all along.」

The woman held her stomach and giggled. The intense impact made her turn to self mockery, and she remained cheerful even though all her facade had been seen through.

「Ikuta Solork, so you know what’s something a spy must never do in the place of operation?」

「......」

「I will do it here to commemorate this humiliation.」

The woman stood up and curtsey before Ikuta, then introduced herself.

「Good evening— I’m Patrenshina. I hope you will remember this name, since you are the second person I directly give this name to.」

Ikuta narrowed his eyes. That foreign name opened a drawer in his memories.

「《The Mischievous Patrenshina》... A children’s song from Nitagua, huh.」

「Oh, so you even know this song… Oh right, your mother is from Kioka. This song is popular over there, so it’s no surprise that she heard it before.」

The unexpected connection brightened her mood, and the woman continued her introduction in enemy territory with a deeper smile.

「As you can see, I’m the protagonist of a children’s song, the heroine that the good girl Haro admired. Explaining it in your terms, I’m a different persona.」

「When, and what event made you the way you are?」

「You can imagine what you like. I don’t want to bring it up— But you have an idea, right? You can imagine what kind of hell we grew up in from the way we are.」

She answered reservedly and didn't say anymore. The commemoration of her defeat ended there— her cheery attitude vanished and the coldness of a spy engulfed her once again.

「Alright then— time to end this.」

Before she even finished, she was kneeling on one knee on the bench with her body close to Ikuta. That posture looks like a couple kissing to bystanders, however, the woman had a gleaming knife on the youth's neck.

「A soldier is hidden on the second storey of that building, ready to snipe in an emergency— Am I right?」

「......」

「Regrettably, you have missed your chance. Since I have moved here behind you, the Wind Gun can't open fire. And… I can slit your throat before you do anything else.」

Patrenshina's seductive voice entered the youth's ear. The taboo of assassination had been shelved away. With the failure of her espionage mission, the last thing she could do was to kill this man, the biggest threat to Kioka, and flee.

「— But I don't understand. You won the espionage battle after so much hardship, so why make a suicidal move like this? You just need to dispose of me without any hesitation.」

The sarcastic question echoed from inches away. Haro was watching the conversation between Ikuta and her. Since she had to use her last resort, Haro could only watch on helplessly.

「Speak your last words. I'm a little curious about what you might say before your death.」

Patrenshina toyed with her prey, with a face determined to kill him. When Ikuta heard that, he nodded with no regards for the blade on his throat.

「... Yes. I have something to say.」

He said and looked Haro in the eye.

—Huh?

They locked gazes. Haro looked at Ikuta's eyes through the persona of Patrenshina. Patrenshina's heart almost stopped from surprise.

「Haro, you have been a bad girl.」

The first words out of the youth's mouth stabbed more viciously into her breasts than the sharpest blade. That's right— She was a bad girl. Once the truth was exposed, she wouldn't be loved anymore...

「A very bad girl… just like everyone would want to play pranks occasionally.」

Ikuta's next sentence caught her off guard, and Haro looked up again.

— Ahh...

She thought he was admonishing him, but that wasn't so. The youth looked at her with his gentle black eyes with no intention of judging her.

「But that is fine. Even if you are not a good girl, even if you are not pure and kind, and your hands are stained with sins— there is still a place that will forgive all that.」

He slowly reached out to Haro who was buried under all that malice. He wasn't judging her or asking her to repent, he was just reaching out to a girl in despair because she couldn't be a good girl.

「Come back to us. We have been waiting for you all this while.」

He didn't ask anything. He didn't want any reason. It didn't matter who you were— Haro finally realized that the dark-haired youth came to see them with that resolve.

「Haro who is a bad girl and also a good girl— All of us love you.」

As the ending loomed before her, she realized that she was already loved by them.

「...... Huh...?」

Patrenshina, who was ready to slit Ikuta's throat with a knife, in order to finish off this last game, suddenly stopped.

「...... Please, Haro. Stop.」

Her wrist was grabbed— by her right hand, Haro's dominant hand. Her right hand clamped on her left hand like a vice, stopping it from wielding the weapon it was holding.

「Stop— It's my turn, right? I have to destroy everything, you know?
」

Patrenshina fell into panic. She couldn't understand— She was born to let Haro survive in a hellish place, and couldn't tell why Haro was stopping her.

「Why? Why are you stopping me? All the kindness and sacrifices will be trampled by us— isn't that our wish!? Isn't that the rule of our hellish life!?」

She still didn’t realize that the hell that she knew wasn’t everything in this world.

「We already decided, so why are you— Ahh!」

Her scream stopped abruptly. Patrenshina was overwhelmed by the resistance from within her, and threw her head back— and then slumped her head down limbly.

And then— the voice said with a weak and hoarse voice, a voice that Ikuta was very familiar with.

「... My, wish...」

She slowly raised her head. Haroma Becker continued holding her left arm that would go berserk if she relaxed, and expressed her feelings with a smile and tears in her eyes.

「...... My wish, has just been, granted......」

One step, two, three— Haro backed away from the youth while holding her left arm… Her dual persona of good and evil built on countless self deceit. She refuted the foundation that her double personality was built on, and faced her true wish all this while.

「... Ahh—」

She was never rewarded for being a good girl.

Malice grew in her heart because she couldn’t survive by being a good girl.

She believed that she had no right to be loved if she wasn’t a good girl.

Just once— she wanted someone to tell her that they would still love her even if she was a bad girl.

「...Ikuta-san...」

Her wish was fulfilled. No, she just learned that wish had already been fulfilled.

Why didn't she notice— how lucky she was to have such great friends. She didn't need to say she wanted to be loved, and she didn't need to pay any price to be loved— they loved and accepted her unconditionally.

Feeling blissed for the first time in her life, Haro smiled. It was a clear smile of satisfaction.

Indeed, therefore— to protect her friends…

「... I'm glad that I met with all of you...!」

She snatched the knife from her sinister left hand, and stabbed at her own throat without any hesitation.



He shouted the name of the sniper, Torway, and at the same time, tossed his clutch aside and pounced at her.

「Woaahh—!」

The knife in Haro's right hand was knocked away by a bullet, and Ikuta tackled her, pinning Haro's right arm and body down.

「— No, Ikuta-san— Let me go—!」

「I won't let you go!」

Haro tried to push the youth away with a sad expression. She had to— since her left arm still wanted to murder Ikuta. But Ikuta dismissed that threat, focusing only on her right arm that was trying to kill herself. His only focus was on preventing Haro from dying.

「Please let me go— Let me die— Or else, I can't stop myself from killing you...!」

「I won't!」

Haro yearned to commit suicide. He knew that she was doing this to protect him, but Ikuta wouldn't permit it.

「I won't let you die! I won't let anyone in the Knights Corp die before me again...!」

He searched quickly through his mind to find a way to resolve this. The sniper is too far away, so he would be the only one on scene, and had to settle this himself somehow.

— Mischievous girl Patrenshina, today is the day you get your just deserts.

All your pranks have been uncovered, and you will get scolded and break into tears—

And his conclusion was to sing a song.

Ikuta recalled the lyrics and melody from his memories, and sang into Haro's ears.

— Here she comes, her mother in a red apron.

She apologized with her daughter, then took her hand and led her home—

Her struggling left arm trembled and stopped moving. This children's song was the origin of Patrenshina's birth. The melody she was so familiar with had new lines she had never heard before.

— The mother told her sobbing daughter, 「dinner will be stew tonight.」

That was her favourite dish, and her tears stopped right then.

She sang blissfully on the way to the kitchen and cooked together with her mother.

「Let's start our wonderful work. Let's get on with it.」—

When the heartwarming song concluded with a happy ending… Haro's left arm had calmed down… Like a child in deep slumber from her mother's lullaby.

「... The actual lyrics didn't have this eleventh chorus. It's made up by my mother.」

Ikuta maintained his posture of holding Haro and said to her quietly. A tear rolled down her cheeks.

「I'm very worried about you. Did you return home properly after playing your pranks? I'm always worried after singing this song… So I can't help making up an ending. The lyrics of a mischievous and playful girl returning to her family in a warm home.」

Haro looked up into the sky, and the nostalgic sunset was right before her. She listened intently— to the sound of children rushing home from a distance.

「— The sun is going to set. Go home, Patrenshina. Go home together with Haro.

You must be hungry after playing around all day, right? Let's cook dinner together.」

Ikuta called out to her. He maintained a tight hold on her, as if to lock this precious life tightly within his arms.

「Together with the people you love, and sit around the warm dinner table—」

The sky slowly darkened, and the crows cawed.

At this moment— the rays of dark red sunlight fell indiscriminately onto both good and bad children.

Chapter 4: A Strong Dose of Medicine

「...... Ughh...」

In the room with a lively atmosphere, a blonde girl was sitting beside a dark-haired youth on a bench, and she seemed a little distracted.

「What's wrong, Chamille? You seem troubled, anything bothering you?」

「N-Not really. I have lots of problems, but I'm not thinking about them right now...」

Chamille wasn't sure how to express herself and answered vaguely as she watched Ikuta and the scene before her.

「—Haro, all this will go into the stew, right? Then I will dice it.」

「Ah! Wait, Ma-kun. Those potatoes are hard to cook thoroughly, so you have to cut them into very small pieces.」

「Well then, please cut them into 2 cm cubes… Hmm～ is the seasoning for the meat fine like this? I can make it spicier...」

Matthew, Torway and Haro were chatting intimately as they cooked. In order for all of them to cook, they picked a room in the large palace that had a kitchen of the right size.

Chamille agreed to the dark-haired youth's proposal readily, but she couldn't tell what his intentions were.

「... What's going on?」

「You don't like making dinner with everyone?」

「No, that’s great. But… How do I put it, this is like...」

A normal family dinner— before she could say that, Chamille remembered that she didn’t have the rights to say that and stopped herself.

Ikuta sensed what she was going to say and shook his head slowly.

「It’s not 『like』... This is an actual normal family dinner.」

「... Haro was colluding with Kioka?」

Matthew stared with his eyes wide open— Three days ago. After the secret battle with Patrenshina ended, Ikuta soothed the sobbing Haro and gathered the members of the Knights Corp in a nearby inconspicuous motel room.

「... Two points. If you want to surprise me with a joke, at least pick a more realistic topic. That joke was terrible. It will be more convincing to tell me that the moon will crash down in three days.」

Matthew snorted sarcastically. This was to be expected of him, and Ikuta chopped his forehead with the edge of his palm.

「—Hah!」

「Guah? W-What the hell!」

「My dear Matthew, unfortunately, you are guilty of the same thing as me, we will apologize to Haro right now. Okay, people can’t see us here… Now~stick~your head~to the~ground～」

「Why?」

Matthew was forced to prostrate along with Ikuta, and resisted bafflingly. He seeked help from Haro with his gaze, and saw her covering her eyes and sobbing. Matthew stood up in surprise.

「... Huh?... Hmm?...... Hah? Hey, Haro, don't cry. It's just a joke, you two are getting too into this… I didn't know you are so good at acting.」

While he was feeling puzzled, tears fell through Haro's fingers. Her sobbing didn't look like an act at all, so Matthew turned to the jade-eyed youth beside him.

「Hey～Torway, what's—」

He stopped mid sentence. The way Torway was biting his lips with downcast eyes made the pudgy youth realize this wasn't a joke.

「................. You are serious?」

Matthew turned towards Ikuta like a rusted wind up toy, and the dark-haired youth crossed his arms with a serious face.

「Before we go on, I want to say something. It's very important— May I?」

Ikuta said with his eyes on Matthew and Torway, then suddenly shouted.

「Haro can do bad things too!」

His sudden words made the two of them look at Ikuta in surprise. He snorted angrily.

「Ignoring this is the biggest mistake of this whole incident. Listen up— this is a reflection meeting for all members of the Knights Corp. Just for today, Yatori will join us too.」

Ikuta took off the shortsword on his waist and placed it on an empty chair, making it seem as if she was sitting there, then turned to Haro.

「Anyway, Haro, can you explain everything in detail? It doesn't matter how long it will take, please start from the beginning.」

「... Yes!...」

Haro wiped her tears and stopped her sobbings with a nod. Ikuta added gently.

「Don't worry, if you explain properly, everyone will understand. That's how everyone here is.」

She nodded, looked at her comrades with her red and puffy eyes, then said with a determined face.

「— I will tell you everything.」

Haro took one hour to roughly lay out her origins.

「— Double persona, huh… Sigh, instead of Haro fooling us with her acting, this explanation sounds more believable...」

Matthew muttered bafflingly. As he was struggling to accept the truth, Ikuta suggested something.

「Haro, Matthew finds it hard to believe. This will drag on to no end, why don't you switch her in?」

This bold solution made Haro open her eyes wide. To soothe her, the dark haired youth added.

「She is docile now, right? Don't worry, we will subdue her if it comes to that.」

Even if Ikuta said that, it wasn't so simple that Haro could switch personas with a nod. However, Ikuta's eyes were serious. They were telling her to show all sides of her.

「...!」

Even without Matthew's suspicion, this was something that had to be done sooner or later. After accepting this as something that had to be done, she clenched her fists and made up her mind.

「......Torway-san, Matthew-san, don't hesitate to shoot me if you sense any danger.」

And of course, Haro had the resolve to kill herself without troubling them. She closed her eyes with a deep, tense breath, and tens of seconds later— She opened them.

「— I'm not some freak show for your entertainment.」

「Wooahh!」

A voice with a completely different tone made Matthew jump from his chair. The woman with Haro's face looked at him coldly and shrugged.

「You are acting too shocked, fattie. She already said she is switching me in.」

「W-Who are you?」

「Like I said, I'm Patrenshina. If you still can't accept this, then I can look at you like you are walking garbage and admonish you with vulgarities that's completely uncharacteristic for Haro.」

Because Matthew didn't answer, she did just that. Five minutes later— Matthew was utterly defeated by the violence of words, and laid on the table like a torn rag.

「... What's with that bitch… How did she become so cruel...」

Torway felt the same way and gulped. Patrenshina put both elbows on the table in a poor display of manners and continued:

「Since you want to see our differences, next will be… I can do tricks that Haro can't perform. Like this magic trick.」

After saying that, she pulled small items like pens, coins and handkerchiefs out of thin air. Ikuta cheered. He was well versed in such tricks, and understood how difficult it was to perform out of the blue.

「And I'm much stronger than Haro. I can kill the fattie easily with my bare hands.」

「... Hmmp!」

Matthew who was confident in melee combat reacted to her taunt. When the seeds of discord was being sowed, Ikuta swiftly interjected.

「Patrenshina. Even if it's a joke, you shouldn't say something like that to your pals.」

「Hah? What are you saying, I'm not your friend, buddy— Uwah!」

Before she could finish, Ikuta tugged at her cheeks. The youth stared at her sternly from close up and continued:

「I will say this again. Do not say that kind of things to your pals.」

The youth warned as he pulled and tugged at her cheeks. Unable to resist his punishment, Patrenshina said meekly with tears in her eyes.

「... Yes～ I'm sorry, I won't do it again...」

「As long as you understand.」

Ikuta quickly let go after hearing her apology. The liberated Patrenshina nursed her cheeks with her head bowed, then looked up at the youth.

「...... Can I switch back to Haro already?」

「If you want to. But do come back if we ask for you. And also— come back if you want to see us.」

Ikuta said with a steadfast smile. Patrenshina looked at him unhappily for a while, then slowly closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes a few seconds later, she was the Haro they were familiar with.

「... Sorry, she doesn't hold back when she speaks...」

Remembering the foul things that were said, Haro bowed deeply at Matthew in apology. Matthew and Torway were both silent, unable to recover from the shock yet. Seeing that the results were as he expected, Ikuta continued:

「— Sigh, that's how things are. You can instinctively tell that she isn't putting on an act.」

「She and Haro are two completely different people… I can just think of it that way, correct?」

Matthew asked with the impression he had gotten earlier. However, Ikuta shook his head with a scowl.

「If you do that, things will just go back to how they were. She is also Haro. Everyone has an evil inner child within them— In Haro's case, that's Patrenshina.」

Don't get that wrong. The youth reminded his friend and continued:

「In the past, we kept ignoring that side of her. That is why I'm holding this reflection meeting for everyone in the Knights Corp. We have unconsciously over relied on Haro who is acting as a good girl, which is why we have not noticed Patrenshina all this while.」

Ikuta's voice was filled with heavy regret. Being lazy in the wrong way was a serious taboo to him.

「Torway, Matthew and Yatori— If I treated Haro as warmly as I treated you, I would have sensed her presence earlier. This is true for all of us, so I hope everyone can reflect on that.」

「... If she approached me for help, I will gladly do so...」

「There are times when people can't ask for help. At times like this, it is the duty of comrades to notice that someone is in trouble.」

Ikuta immediately rebuked Matthew's weak excuse. He swept his gaze across Matthew, Torway and Yatori's shortsword, then added with a sigh.

「Besides— it's not just Haro, in our circle, there aren't many forthright characters who would approach others to discuss their troubles.」

Ugghh… Torway looked down with a groan. The issue pointed out by the youth was an accurate depiction of how he had been recently.

Beside him, Matthew fell into deep thought after hearing what Ikuta said, accepting the criticism and said:

「... I know we are at fault too. You are right, we spent so much time together and trust each other to watch our backs, but I know too little about Haro. I'm ashamed about that.

However— This is different from betrayal. You confessed to your acts of betrayal, which is the point of us forgiving you in the first place.」

Matthew pressed sternly. Sensing that the moment has finally come, Haro said quietly:

「... The first espionage action I took after meeting everyone is during the naval battle, on the 『Yellow Dragon』.」

This unexpected name made the other three open their eyes wide, as they thought about what happened.

「During our sea trip to the Hioredo Ore Mines? That long ago...」

「As you know, a person similar to me — 『Phantom Unit』 member, Naval Commander Danmier Kanron, is also on that ship. Yatori-san saw through his true identity, but I helped him to escape during a crucial moment.」

When he heard that, Torway nodded as if he just remembered something.

「Oh right, the hostage back then was Haro-san. Which means...」

「That's right, I got captured intentionally. To help him get out of that mess, using a 『guest』 to the navy like me as a shield is the most effective method...」

「I see… by the way, I didn't quite catch you earlier, did you say you are a member of the Phantom Unit?」

「Yes. My mission is different from the people we fought in the northern territories, and I'm a newbie in the special agent department...」

Matthew groaned with his hands on his head. He found it difficult to accept the true identity of the woman that had always been on his side.

「I stopped for quite a while after that— actually, I only switched to Patrenshina's persona recently and officially began my mission. When I took part in the reconnaissance mission alongside Matthew-san and Sazarf-san. As the priests' incitement of the devotees are not complete yet, I delayed the unit's movements to bide for time. That's why you encounter the citizens asking you for help back then.」

The slightly plump youth's face turned even more bitter. Haro shirked her shoulders at that, but didn't stop her confession.

「I gave instructions to the agents and provided the plan to rescue Rear Admiral Elulufay Tenerexilla. The sailors escaped from the prison camp, seized weapons and supplies in a nearby military base, then linked up directly with the devotees before heading into the mountains… That was all part of my plan.」

「So everything has been going according to your plan… You two are amazingly capable.」

Matthew couldn't help saying that. He was more surprised than sarcastic.

「However, I wasn't expecting Her Majesty to go personally. After her arrival, we continued our mission with the goal of increasing the Empire's losses and protecting her. It was proceeding smoothly— until Ikuta-san's arrival.」

Haro glanced at the dark-haired youth, cast her gaze down and continued.

「We then tried to frame Major Yuguni, contact the Kioka camp, and use all available methods, but to no avail… It was a total defeat to Ikuta-san, leading to this.」

「... How many people?」

Matthew cut in suddenly with a heavy voice.

「How many soldiers died because of your espionage?」

The mood turned tense. Haro's shoulders shivered from the guilt, but she answered without hiding anything.

「I don't know the exact numbers. However… including indirect reasons, probably more than one thousand.」

「......!」

The number was greater than he expected, which made Matthew slam his fist on the table. Ikuta tried to soften his tone and said.

「Matthew, as a medic, Haro has saved many… maybe even more lives.」

「Such things can't be cancelled out!」

The pudgy youth telled. Ikuta didn't flinch before this fact.

「You are right— but so what? I won't blame or punish her.」

His unreasonable brash words made Matthew glare at him. Facing Matthew's emotions head on, the dark-haired youth answered firmly.

「You can accuse me of showing favouritism. However— don't you think the order of persecuting her is ridiculous? What about the crimes of that family who gave her a hellish childhood? And the sins

of that guy who pushed a twelve year old girl into a world of betrayal just because she had the talent?」

「——!—」

「No one will pursue that matter. All those crimes will be ignored. She is just the result of a vicious chain of malice, and the true culprit should be held accountable as the source of all that… I'm not saying Haro didn't harbour any malice. Even so, I still don't want to blame or persecute her. Instead of doing that, as comrades, there is something more important for us to do.」

Ikuta answered and stared with firm conviction. Matthew grit his teeth and squeeze his voice out with great self restraint:

「... You are saying… blaming the person who made the mistake won't solve the problem...?」

Ikuta suddenly relaxed his face. His words were filled with gratitude and sincere respect.

「I'm glad you remember that. Indeed— doing that will just satisfy you emotionally. Facing the source of the mistake, then teaching and guiding the person is the only answer.」

He followed Matthew's reasoning to reach a conclusion. The pudgy youth stood up with clenched fists.

「I know, I get it!? But, damn it, my emotions can't keep up with my logic. If I can't blame the person who set us up, then who should take responsibility for the great number of lives lost? How do I get my emotions in order?」

With nowhere to vent his anger, the pudgy youth smashed his fist on the table. Ikuta immediately answered firmly:

「There is only one answer— we will share the responsibility. Everything that happened on that battlefield, no matter what it is, should be shouldered by everyone… Not just me alone.」

「......!」

Ikuta didn't back down. At this moment, Matthew understood the youth's determination towards his comrades. Compared to him two years ago, his resolve had gotten even stronger.

After exchanging his thoughts with Ikuta, Matthew turned to Haro with a strict face.

「... Hey, Haro...!」

She pressed down firmly on her breast when she heard him calling her… She looked ready for any admonishments. She was ready to kill herself if Matthew demanded her to die for her sins.

「...........! ...… You! ...... You...!」

Matthew was trembling as he glared at Haro who was standing resolutely before him. Five minutes passed, ten minutes passed— and twice that amount of time passed in tense silence.

「........... You are really sly.」

Finally, the pudgy youth relaxed his fists. He had a face of resignation.

「That's too scary… if you are not behind us when we are wounded on the field. Just by imagining that, my back would turn cold and sweaty, knees would weaken, and arms get heavy. Would probably vomit mom's spaghetti from being nervous… Without you on the battlefield, I don't think I can fight like I used to.」

「...Matthew-san...」

Haro looked firmly at him. Matthew's gaze had a strong sense of bitterness.

「Forget about the battlefield, if you didn't speak up for me, Empress Chamille would have cut off my head in the past two years… I know, Haro, that you have been saving me. That you are supporting us from an inconspicuous position.」

Matthew felt angry and sad about this betrayal. She caused the death of many of his subordinates— Even now, he was desperately suppressing the urge to blame her.

However, those feelings were in conflict with his gratitude towards her, leaving a clearer sense of camaraderie in his heart. When he realized that, Matthew slowly composed his agitated emotions and reached a conclusion.

「... To be honest, I don't know if I can forgive you. I can't ignore my subordinates' death.」

Haro closed her eyes and waited for her judgement. Matthew hung his head before her and said in a trembling voice.

「That's to be expected. I'm their commander, and they entrust their lives to me— I can't deflect that responsibility, and I don't plan to do so.」

Matthew looked at his hands and thought about the lives that had slipped through his hands. And the number of lives that he would lose because of his immaturity and failure in the future.

And he was certain of one thing— to minimize those losses, he would need the power of the woman before him. He really feared the battlefield without the support of Haroma Becker. He thought about how her presence had been a salvation to him all this while.

「However, guilty or not, it won't change the fact that you are a part of the Knights Corp.」

Matthew raised his head and said, his voice no longer trembling.

「And so— from now on, I will get to know you more seriously, listen to you more seriously, and take more initiative to chat with you. I won't leave you alone again.

Similarly, you have to share your burden too, and I will shoulder them together with you. I have grown at least this much since we first met on that ship.」

With that, he walked over and offered his hand to Haro. Torway also stood up.

「For the past two years, I thought I have been working hard for the sake of everyone, but I didn't pay attention to anything beside my own troubles. Haro-san, compared to Ik-kun and Ma-kun, I have no rights to blame you. I'm useless for neglecting so many things.」

Torway bit his lips, then walked to Haro and offered his hand too. His jade-coloured eyes looked at his comrade with warm determination.

「I won't make the same mistake again. So.. Can you give me the chance to fight alongside you once more?」

The two of them offered their hands of friendship, and Haro just stood still at a loss. She knew she didn't have the right to take their hands— and could only hold back her tears.

「... Will Yatori-san forgive me...?」

She found herself asking before she realized it. Ikuta held a hand to his chin and muttered.

「It would be hard given her position. The values of the Igsem won't forgive your espionage activities— but I know Yatori isn't someone who blindly follow the rules.」

Ikuta smiled, then placed a coin on his thumb. He turned to the vermillion-haired girl's shortsword and said:

「Let's ask her then. We will know in no time— head or tails?」

The coin was flicked up, drew an arc into the air, bounced off the sword guard and landed on the chair. Ikuta declared the result to Haro.

「See— she forgives you.」

The coin beside the shortsword showed heads. Haro picked up the coin and inspected, then smiled with tears in her eyes.

「... How sly. The coin have heads on both sides.」

「That's right. Because she told me to use that coin.」

Ikuta said nonchalantly. A coin that was heads on both sides— He was saying that was Yatori's answer to Haro.

Haro held the coin tightly to her chest and nodded profusely. No one felt that was a lie— Haro could even sense the vermillion-haired girl standing beside her with a smile.

「—Haro? What's wrong, Haro?」

Her mind that was lost in her memory was pulled back to reality.

「— Your Majesty.」

She was standing blankly before the thoroughly cooked mutton. Chamille watched her from the side and asked worriedly.

「I saw that your hands had stopped moving, and seem to be lost in thought. Haro… if there's anything worrying you, do tell me. I don't know if I can help, but it's better than holding it all in.」

The Empress looked at her anxiously. Her concern made Haro happy, and reminded her of the continuation of the scene that played out in her mind earlier.

— Chamille— I hope you can avoid telling her the truth.

At the end of the long discussion, Ikuta proposed that.

— She is also an important comrade. Right now, I'm doting on her very much. However, Chamille is also a child. As adults, we have to handle this situation, but she doesn't have any obligation to take responsibility for this mistake.

When she heard that, Haro understood the biggest reason for the dark-haired youth's return to the battlefield.

— The most trusted person being a spy will make her feel more uneasy, given her complicated position. So don't tell her for now, and keep it in our hearts— before the right moment.

In order to protect the thing most precious to him, Haro nodded with gratitude.

—Haro, I will leave the decision and timing of revealing this secret to you.

She decided to tell the truth when all the dust had settled. When the war was over, the country was stable… and when the girl had truly matured. Before that moment came, she had to continue playing the part of a gentle big sister.

「— Thank you, Your Majesty. But I'm fine, I just recalled a happy memory.」

「Is that so… That's great.」

When she saw Haro's firm smile, Chamille decided not to ask about the other thing weighing on her mind. As they chatted, the dishes were being done.

「Alright, I'm done here. How's the bread?」

「Hold on. The stove is different from the norm… it's probably not burnt.」

「The stew is almost done, I hope it will be to your liking～」

The finished dishes were served one after another. This wasn't the rations stuffed into their mouths in a battlefield, or the food served daily in the mess, or the palace cuisine made by first class chefs. These were plain and heartwarming home dishes.

「Ohh, everything has been served. Let me sample...」

「You didn't even help, so no snacking! Sit your ass down!」

Matthew slapped away Ikuta's hand that was reaching for the plates. With that as the cue, everyone sat down around the dining table. The vermillion-haired girl's shortsword was placed in one of these seats— and the dishes were also made for six.

「Ahem. Well then— things are a little off, but let's toast to the Knights Corp's dinner—」

「「「「Cheers!」」」」

Chamille led the toast and everyone clinked their cups filled with juice. The lively gathering just got started.

Amidst all the noise— the other person inside Haro also bashfully said 「Cheers.」



Clank! The sound of something shattering entered the ears of the woman sweeping the corridor.

「—?」

Her hands stopped, and she quickly moved to the living room where the sound came from.

「What happened, Hubby?」

She asked after entering. The man she called out to was sitting stiffly on the Bayoshie rattan chair, with a letter on his left hand and his Yaponiku ceramic tea cup shattered by his feet. How rare, she thought.

「— Oh— Sorry. How do I put this— I was a little, no, I was very shocked.」

Noticing his wife coming in, the man— Kioka Republic Prime Minister, Ario Kyakushii, finally snapped back to his senses and started to move. But his wife stopped him immediately. For the person responsible for cleaning up, it would be more help for him to stay still.

She swiftly picked up the shattered cup pieces, wiped the wet carpet with a rag. Ario then said blankly.

「Saram, have you ever experienced someone snatching your treasure away from you before?」

「Treasure, huh?」

Saram replied as she scrubbed the floor. Between this husband and wife, she wasn't surprised by any sudden seemingly deep questions.

「... When I was little, there was one time when the other kids stepped on a sand castle I built over three days. I believed the emotions that welled up within me was very close to bloodlust.」

「I think so too. Because a part of what I'm feeling right now is probably that too.」

The man raised his head slightly. He placed the letter on his knees, then continued his monologue with his eyes opened wide, staring at the ceiling.

「I'm doubting my eyes. The talent I unearthed with my own eyes, one of the masterpieces I guided to perfection, just sent me a message that she had cracked. Ahhh— how do I describe this sense of loss. As if a hole has been dug out of my chest, as if a corner of my heart has been chipped off— with my limited prowess in literature, I can only think of such empty proses.」

Ario said with self mockery. This was a rare sight to Saram. He seldom mocked himself seriously.

「However… The heaviest emotion in my heart should be vexation. I'm vexed that she got taken away, and hate the one who took her, like a youth chasing after his first crush.

Who took the perfect maiden that I sculpted? For the bright future of Kioka, I still have many things I need her to do. Just thinking about the loss of potential breaks my heart.」

So he would lament in such a way when he really felt vexed. Saram found her husband's attitude refreshing. She knew his personality was more complicated than others, and in terms of observing Ario Kyakushii, Saram Kyakushii was the highest authority.

「Unforgivable. This is— unforgivable.」

Saram looked at Ario who was trying to show his jealousy and hatred from different perspectives, as if he was some rare animal. But she didn’t try to console him. Her husband didn’t look unhappy either.

Whether she had any love for him in the normal sense aside— every day she spent with her companion felt very meaningful.

[redacted]

This was the Grand Cathedral to the far north of Kioka. In a room inside one of the spire towers of the Grand Cathedral, a man’s voice echoed loudly.

「— That concludes the report regarding the current situation of the Empire, my Pope.」

He was a buff middle aged man in military uniform, his head was shaved so clean that it reflected the sky. He was a veteran with the atmosphere of a pious priest. As for the person listening to the report— She was a petite old lady wearing extravagant priestly robes.

「Is that so… It seems this Empress is very cruel.」

「Yes. But on the whole, I can sense her deep thinking and farsight. My old bones are hoping she is a wise monarch pretending to be a tyrant.」

The man who spoke viciously to everyone would only restrain himself before this person. Accepting his display of great respect, the old lady smiled:

「Since you say so, that might just be true, General Akgarpa Sa Domeisha. The fact is, the Empire that was on the verge of falling had defied expectations and survived. I have to admit that Kioka didn’t get everything to go their way.」

After saying that, the old lady closed her eyes and fell into deep thought. After pondering under General Akgarpa's gaze for a long while, she finally said.

「... Let's try meeting them.」

「... Your Grace, that's...」

「I want to speak with them face to face. Be it that Empress or the vassal supporting her. The hopeless Empire with its abandoned fields and corrupt land, might sprout a new sapling with the rise of the young generation. I want to confirm that.」

She told him in a clear voice, and added to put that man at ease:

「But it will be unwise to make Kioka suspicious… We should host a three nations conference. That's good too, it's been a while since I last met the 『Insomniac Brilliant General』.」

「I have complicated feelings about that brat… But if Your Grace wishes for it, it will be done.」

General Akgarpa knelt in acceptance. The old lady smiled at him, then formed a circle with her fingers before her chest.

「Work tirelessly to gather the shards of hope. Until our world that was once forsaken by god finds a bright future again.

Together with the blessings of the Four Great Sprites— Lord, please guide us.」

With the gang sign that symbolizes the stars of their patron god 【Alderamin】, she recited a scripture. General Akgarpa bowed silently with deep reverence.

The leader of the theocratic nation, La Saia Alderamin, the person at the top of its religion— Pope Jenancy Labutesuma, had a mixture of

deep worry and expectations in her eyes. Reflected in her eyes was the city below, as she watched from the window of the spire tower

Two weeks after settling the issue with Haro. Ikuta and Chamille stood inside a corner of the Grand Courtyard within the Deep Green Hall, and waited.

「— The two administrative officers you recommended will be coming today right, Solork?」

The Empress confirmed with him. The youth furrowed his brows when he heard that.

「That's right… But I feel conflicted. Is it really fine to recruit them?」

「What?」

The unexpectedly meek answer made Chamille look his way a little anxiously. Ikuta continued with a troubled face.

「After Professor fled to Kioka, there were still many 『Disciples of Anarai』 left in the Empire. There are many talents amongst them, and recruiting them as administrative officers will be great, however—」

Before he could even finish, the court's martial officer genuflected before them and reported.

「Your Majesty— the two administrative officer candidates have just arrived.」

「Good, show them in.」

With the Empress' permission, the martial officer turned to the Grand Courtyard entrance. Chamille watched him leave and asked.

「You said they will be great as administrative officers… and?」

「Well… All of them have weird personalities. Especially one of the candidates I found this time.」

Ikuta answered embarrassingly, which further stimulated the girl's emotion of unease. At this moment, a man brought in by the martial officer walked boldly before her with a fearless smile.

「Twenty guards, three attendants, two martial officers— do you know you can cut down your payroll by that much?」

Before his greeting, that was the first thing that man said. When the martial officer escorting him turned pale, the man genuflected before the Empress.

「— Fufufu… Nice to meet you, Your Majesty...」

He was a youth with dark hair that reached his shoulders and had delicate facial features. The monocle on his right eye glimmered suspiciously as he introduced himself.

「I'm here on the recommendation of my junior disciple Ikuta Solork, one of the 『Disciples of Anarai』, Yorga Daimudaritsu. Pleased to meet you, fufufu...」

Yorga ended his introduction by laughing like some kind of conspirator, then continued.

「As for the proposal to reduce expenses just now. Your Majesty seems to be an excellent ruler, but there are still many ways to reduce the budget, starting with the palace maintenance fees. If you let me handle this project... Fufufufu.」

Yorga spread his arms theatrically and continued his monologue:

「When you see the results of this project, Your Majesty will then say— it's as if a secret treasure vault was found in the palace… Fufufu… fufufufufu… fufufu guah?」

Someone smacked the back of that youth's head with a palm, and the monocle fell off his face and rolled on the carpet. As the martial officers stood stiffly in place, the second person walked forth.

「Sorry for the wait——! I'm making my debut, jang jang jang～!」

「Ahh! My all-seeing eye of wisdom!」

Yorga chased after his monocle that was rolling on the carpet. The girl who forced him to do so said nonchalantly.

「Ohh～ it fell off again? Stop wearing that monocle, it can't sit on your face properly. Because your facial features are shallower than normal people～」

「Shut up! This is my strategy! And you smack the back of my head knowing this would happen! This isn't cheap, you know!? Just how many lenses do you think you have broken!?」

Yorga rubbed the monocle he picked up with a cloth and yelled. The girl ignored him and just stood haughtily, and Ikuta sighed deeply as he watched all that.

「And this is just the first meeting… The two of you are the same as always.」

「Hi～ Ikuta-nii! You seemed older now? You got rich, huh? Are we eating palace dishes today? Oh, I have another question, describe within 500 words why you think that cape looks cool!」

The girl asked a string of questions. She was wearing clothes that were easy to move in, and her demeanour showed boundless

energy. Chamille who was observing all that felt some kind of danger from her, and tugged on the youth's sleeve.

「... S-Solork, Solork...!」

「Sorry Chamille, I will get her to settle down… It's been five years, of course I will look older. My salary has gone up, but not to the point of being ridiculously wealthy. I can make arrangements if you want to eat dishes from the palace, but don't blame me if you get poisoned. I have to dress like someone important, that's why I'm wearing this cape. As for whether I look cool in it, that's subjective.」

Ikuta answered all the questions as if he was trimming away the branches, and seized the initiative when it was his turn to speak.

「Anyway, let's stop with the questions for now. When you meet someone for the first time, you should greet them first, Malvackie.」

「You are ————wrong!」

When the youth called her name, the girl yelled agitatedly and corrected him.

「My name is Mairitsuuinvuakkyen! Who the heck is Malvackie!? If you read it in such a plain and boring way, my ancestors will pop a vein! Correct it right now, Ikuta-nii!」

「Hmm, you are nagging about how your name is pronounced again...? No matter how much we practiced, we couldn't pronounce it correctly, that's why we all decided to call you Malvackie, right?」

「Who knows～ I don't remember such a thing happening! I'm a girl who lives in the moment, Mairitsuuinvuakkyen Shattouiettanyerushisukattsu! One, two, three～ say it again with me! Before everyone can pronounce it properly, I won't let anyone go home!」

Not just her name, the girl was forcing them to remember her long family name. *How should I handle this?*
Ikuta placed his hands on his hips.

「...Mairitsuuinvuakkyen Shattouiettanyerushisukattsu.」

The Empress said fluently, dousing the girl's momentum in his stead. In the Grand Courtyard that had gone completely silent, Chamille looked right at the girl before her.

「The territory known for the long names of their residence and unique pronunciation— you must be from Lasukaryeta Town in the western territories. I have learned about that, but this is the first time I met someone from there.」

No one could rival her when it involves information about the Empire. Surprised by Chamille's show of broad knowledge, the girl stared at her and asked:

「... What's your name?」

「Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik. I know this is par for the course for royalty, but I seldom meet people with a name longer than mine. I have to say, you gave me a good experience.」

Chamille was relieved that they could finally communicate normally, and sunk back onto her throne. As for that girl, her eyes were sparkling with a smile.

「—Ikuta-nii, Ikuta-nii.」

「What is it?」

She spoke to his senior disciple who was in a higher elevation than her, and said while pointing at Chamille.

「This girl has a bright future.」

「Throughout the history of this nation, you are probably the first to say something like that to the Monarch.」

Ikuta retorted sarcastically, and the girl acted bashful as if she was being praised. He was struck by a strong sense of defeat, but the dark-haired youth still managed to turn to the Empress:

「That's how it is… I feel uneasy as the one who recruited them, but they are the administrative officer candidates. In any case, Yorga is just trying to act cool, and is normally really competent. He will be a great help to the finance department. Normally.」

「Ikuta, stop repeating the word normally, normally! I get goosebumps when I hear that word, I deserve special treatment!」

「And he has a stubborn side, so just treat him gently from time to time. Well, when you see him sulking in a corner doing mental arithmetics, then cajole him a little.」

After giving a rough guide on how to deal with Yorga, Ikuta turned his gaze to the girl, and turned gloomy.

「As for Malvackie... How do I put this...」

「It's Mairitsuuinvuakkyen!」

「... How do I put this… Even I think it's too rash to recruit her...」

Ikuta felt the urge to ask his past self that question, then sighed as a change of pace.

「Let's do this again— This is a 『Disciple of Anarai』 who joined later than I did, and as you can see, her sensibility and abilities are completely different from other Scientists. Skipping the details… A thin line separates her and an idiot.」

「What the heck～! You are not speaking up for me at all～!」

「Putting it in extreme terms, she is known as the strongest Scientist. And of course, 90% of that is sacacism.」

「You are not planning to help me at all, right!?」

「The 『Disciples of Anarai』 are all weirdos, but no one is as extreme as her… And that's why I'm recruiting her. I'm a little tired, so you can hear the rest from the subject herself.」

He just switched gears, but lost his drive in no time. Ikuta dumped the task of handling this girl all on Chamille. Chamille was taken aback by the girl's brashness, but the youth wasn't joking about recruiting her. With her mind made up, Chamille said to the person before her.

「...Mairitsuuinvuakkyen.」

「Yes～! My name is very long, so you can just call me Vackie for short!」

「「Then let everyone do so from the very start!」」

Ikuta and Yorga retorted at the same time. Chamille did her best to maintain a serious attitude and continued:

「... Well then, Vackie. What can you do?」

Vackie placed her hands on her hips, and said confidently with her chest puffed out.

「I'm a Scientist, and Science can do anything.」

「What is this Science that you speak of?」

「The ability to analyze things.」

The moment she said that, the atmosphere around the girl changed. There was a dangerous gleam in her eyes.

「Using logic and instinct to cut away all the complications, and sort everything out properly. Logic is the rebellion against the complexity of this world, a counterpunch against its haughty facade. Since the world is difficult to understand, I will simplify it, and drag it down to a level where everyone can understand it easily and laugh at it— and I'm that invader who will commit blasphemy against it.」

Her words came forth like the waves, showing the fervour in her heart. The Empress could feel her passion and immediately realized— she was an extraordinary talent.

「I can't forgive unfathomable problems remaining unfathomable. This is a display of the anger in my heart.」

Vackie said without any hesitation, baring her fangs like a predator that was mimicking a human.

「Even more so for a country. If I don't cut open the country, my fury won't be appeased. So— if you leave it to me, the results will be astonishing. All the complex problems will disappear. The mind boggling issues will vanish with my categorization.」

The fire in the girl's eyes was now beyond passion and ambition, and reached the realm of insanity. On the other hand— when Ikuta saw Vackie's display of madness, Ikuta remembered the reason he recruited her.

「I will get started then. It should be here— the problems that had twisted beyond recognition from the passage of time, that no one can ever solve!」

This was a strong dose of medicine. He understood the power and danger involved, which was exactly the reason he recruited his junior disciple to the palace.

Credits

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